

GERALD
KERSH



A RE-ISSUE OF HIS FIRST
NOVEL WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY THE AUTHOR

MEN
ARE SO
ARDENT



MEN ARE SO ARDENT

Gerald Kersh

All Gerald Kersh's admirers will surely want to read his first novel, *Men Are So Ardent*. It made his reputation with the critics immediately, but the war killed it dead before the public had much of a chance to make it a "seller". Even so, it was never forgotten, and in response to many requests he has revised his text and provided a foreword in his own inimitable style for this new edition.

MEN ARE SO ARDENT

Also by
GERALD KERSH

THEY DIE WITH THEIR BOOTS CLEAN
THE NINE LIVES OF BILL NELSON
THE DEAD LOOK ON
THE HORRIBLE DUMMY AND OTHER STORIES
BRAIN AND TEN FINGERS
FACES IN A DUSTY PICTURE
AN APE, A DOG AND A SERPENT
THE WEAK AND THE STRONG
NEITHER MAN NOR DOG
CLEAN, BRIGHT AND SLIGHTLY OILED
NIGHT AND THE CITY
SAD ROAD TO THE SEA
PRELUDE TO A CERTAIN MIDNIGHT
CLOCK WITHOUT HANDS
THE SONG OF THE FLEA

MEN ARE SO ARDENT

A Novel by

GERALD KERSH



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ANN (A) AND BILL (B) TARG.
(A) WITH LOVE AND ADMIRATION
(B) WITH ADMIRATION
GERALD KERSH

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FOREWORD

I BELIEVE that it was Emile Zola who said something like this: that he did not write because he liked writing, but because writing was an obsession which, if he did not give way to it, would make him ill. I understand the inwardness of this. If you are a writer, to write is to live; unless (if you will pardon the expression) you spill your guts, you are useless as a handful of tangled and knotted string.

So for better or worse a writer writes. If he writes well, so much the better. If he writes badly—which is generally the case, even if, in the process of disentangling his knotted psychic gut, he bores half the world, he egests . . . he says, to the best of his ability, all that he has to say.

Whether he has anything to say or not, God knows. I believe that much of the anger, much of the fury of many of my colleagues proceeds from incapacity to say what they want to say—the inability to find something worth saying—a sort of literary inarticulateness.

Now I am a story-teller.

It pleases me to please as many people as possible by telling them stories. In a different place and a different time, if I did not know how to read and write and haggle with editors, I should be sitting on a little arse-rubbed rug, saying: "Once upon a time there was a time when there was no one but God . . ." People who were interested would have dropped copper coins in my little wooden bowl, and so I should have earned myself a shaslick, or, perhaps, a bowl of rice with trimmings. As matters stand, I write stories on a typewriter, or dictate them to a patient but glamorous secretary, and presses roll them out so that instead of telling a story to twenty, I tell that same story to a million people.

It is still the story I would have chanted on the mat.

Now this story, *Men Are So Ardent*, is not as well told as I would wish it to be. What story is? Yet when I wrote it, fifteen years ago, I thought that it was pretty good. I sent it out into the world with a great noise, puffing myself up like a pigeon. And later, having written another book which I believed to be better, I was ashamed of it.

So this sort of thing goes on: I have never produced a work over which, at the moment of completion, I have not clucked like a hen with a new-laid egg . . . only to blame myself later, for an incompetent fool, an abortionist of some unborn thing well conceived.

Men Are So Ardent may, in relation to certain other types of other work I have done, be described as immature. Maybe. But what is a man to do? If story-telling is his life, so he must live it. As God gives him strength so he must grow. He is too close to himself to see himself; and his contemporaries, similarly, cannot see him either.

One must, with all good will, throw oneself with all one has right into the world—always bearing in mind that there is only Good and Evil—loving mankind, and aware of the fact that there is only Black and White, Day and Night. Between these two are Twilight . . . which is nothing but daylight polluted with darkness.

Reading this book, consider what I have said and assume that, as a boy, I was trying to say it as best I could.

GERALD KERSH

I

THE HOUSEHOLD



WHEN everything else is dust, the enamelled iron advertisement-plates will remain; abominably bright, far too legible, brazen with the cockiness of the early twentieth century. They are impermeable and everlasting; they typify that pre-war illusion of commercial stability; when Man is extinct, they will still brightly urge him to take Iron Jelloids and drink Mazawattee Tea.

The Barker house-front above the shop-window was armour-plated with such indestructible advertising matter. The four windows of the upper part peeped out of an immense arrangement of about forty-eight plates which said:—READ THE DAILY CHRONICLE, PRICE ONE HALFPENNY. The very fascia of the shop was an iron streamer advertising an obsolete smoking mixture at four-pence an ounce. Imperishable allusions to dead and forgotten twopenny shags and penny cigars were riveted to every available square foot of brick-work.

The window was filled with displays of empty cigarette cartons in high pyramids, tin bars of chocolate, and several bowls containing sprinklings of tobacco glued to cardboard discs. Everything was dusty and faded. Mr. Barker had called himself a "Newsagent and Tobacconist"; his widow might have claimed to be a kind of general merchant. She sold cigarettes, carded brands of aspirin tablets, liquid glue, cough mixture, purgatives, hairpins, geometrical compasses, pencils, pens, and vanilla essence; newspapers; sticks of liquorice like vulcanite, brandy balls at eight a penny, hypertrophied globes of sugar known as "gob stoppers", sherbet suckers, toffee which could be chewed for twenty-four hours without diminishing, chewing-gum which could

be blown into bubbles, liquorice bootlaces, worm cakes, and chocolate cigarettes; black-edged envelopes of condolence, pink note-paper for elegant correspondence, sixpenny will-forms, ninepenny fountain pens with Goldorium nibs "Equal to Fourteen Carat"; twopenny books on the interpretation of dreams, fourpenny novelettes—the love-literature of the proletarian female; boys' periodicals which told of the adventures of such immortal heroes as Billy Bunter, Sexton Blake, and Tinker—characters that belong to English national literature as surely as Falstaff and Pickwick; pot-menders, "The Big Shot" brand of repeating cap-pistol, tin swords, tin motor-cars, tin pea-shooters, pink Guy Fawkes masks, and fireworks. The shop was so full that the little semicircular space of bare floor in front of the counter might have been cleared with a scythe from a jungle of cheap things. From the remote and darkened ceiling hung a grubby electric globe, flyblown to a uniform brownness, on flex which was thick and fluffy with accumulations of soft black dust. Whoever happened to be serving behind the counter was lost behind a barricade of jars, under a clattering multitude of dangling cards. There was no side entrance. One reached the upper part by lifting a flap in the counter, and struggling over a crackling mass of discarded wrapping-paper, through a treacherous shadow-land which smelled of dampness and tobacco.

The shop-parlour was the living-room. It was papered in blue and gold. The blue had gone black, and the gold had gone blue; roughly speaking, the walls had the colour of a black eye. Beyond the mean little window there was a tiny garden which brought forth nothing but fuzzy, muscoid things, slugs, snails, and grey insects that shun the light. There was a tub of earth in which somebody had planted a potato which had grown up and run to seed in a yellow and unsavoury luxuriance. One or two fronds of bracken unrolled their sticky brown tongues. Beyond the garden one could see the tortured black silhouette of an oil refinery, the sinister complications of a sulphuric acid factory, and above all, the tall, fine cone of a spire—so high, so vivid, and so tapering that

it was somehow reminiscent of a prolonged cry rising to an ecstatic shriek.

Mr. Barker had had a weakness for green plush. It had appealed to him as a symbol of opulence. Thus, the oval table was covered with a green plush cloth embellished with nearly a hundred pompoms, and the chairs were upholstered in green plush. There was also a piano, with red silk panels. One of these panels was marred by a small round hole. Mrs. Barker regarded this hole as a gaping affirmation of Paula's evil passion. At the age of three, nineteen years ago, Paula had flown into a temper and, horrible to relate, had thrust a finger into the very piano.

Mrs. Barker was a heavy, pale woman. She habitually wore a curious, elongated frock of b'ue taffeta, shaped like a night-dress. She resembled a dumpling. You felt that if you prodded her with a finger, you would make a deep indentation which would take a long time to fill up. She had never ceased to lament her husband's death. If you mentioned the word "husband" in her presence, tears squirted. She loved nothing better than a good funeral and cheered herself up by putting flowers on dead friends' graves; wished nobody any harm, but relished a good operation. Though a humane woman, she revelled in tumours. The errors of surgeons were meat and drink to her; she was a walking encyclopædia of mythical medical blunders, and could describe, with a wealth of detail, how Doctor Smith had left a pair of scissors in Mrs. Jones's throat, how Doctor Brown had left a sponge in Mrs. Robinson's stomach, or how Doctor Black had left his hat and gloves in Mrs. White's abdomen. She was devoted to her children. If there was one thing she enjoyed more than a funeral, it was a bit of self-sacrifice.

So, this Sunday morning, she arose even earlier than usual, and opened the shop. She had dusted everything and put everything in its place before Edna came down at nine o'clock.

"Down at last," said Mrs. Barker, "well, I don't blame you. Get your rest, that's the only way to keep your health and strength. I'd stop in bed, too, if there was somebody to do *my*

work. Ah dear, well. You'd better keep an eye on the shop whilst I cook the breakfast."

"What did you think I was going to do?" asked Edna, with early-morning petulance.

"Now there's a nice way to talk!"

"Well, you know very well I always go into the shop, mother. I hate being told to go when I'm going all the time. There's nothing more annoying," said Edna.

Mrs. Barker went into the kitchen. A gas-ring popped and roared, and the smell of frying bacon filled the house.

Outside, the air began to quiver with the various loud noises of the resurgent suburb.

In Rye Road, the Church Lads' Brigade was starting its invariable Sabbath uproar. It seems impossible that the Lord can rest on the seventh day, with the Church Lads' Brigade at large. A procession—forty little boys led by a youth twiddling a nickel-plated club, followed by four old men of odd sizes in Glengarry bonnets—came past the gasworks. The band began to play. The drummer belaboured his instrument with unbridled passion; a curly-haired child with cymbals as big as dust-bin lids gave himself over to the production of noise; the bugler, who had been itching for days to have a blow at his copper bugle, made a false start, but rapidly outstripped his colleagues in an agony of zeal. The file marched down the High Road, each boy carrying his empty pouch; an ecstatic evangelical centipede with the voice of the Last Trump.

Two trams, lurching and clanking, jolted up the road and down the road. In Rye Square, a phalanx of Salvationists armed with heavy brass instruments opened fire upon the eardrums of the general public. Numerous ardent representatives of that godly organisation scattered, rattling pennies in reverberating wooden boxes. A barrel-organ played "Lily of Laguna" to the ingenious accompaniment of two table-spoons. From the Turners Green Junction there came the smash-smash-clank of shunting and the noise of whistles.

Turners Green was settling down to its day of rest.

Paula Barker awoke. In a feverish attempt to recapture the

nothingness of sleep, she covered her head with the blankets. But the noise penetrated. No blanket is proof against the blaring trumpets and thumping tom-toms of Sunday morning evangelism. Moreover, new noises broke out above her and below her. The Jacksons, on the top floor, had started their daily bickering; this time, about getting the milk. Irene Jackson's voice came down shrilly:

"I don't see why it should always be me!"

Mrs. Jackson replied:

"You lazy girl, be ashamed!"

"Why *shouldn't* you go down and get the milk?" demanded Oswald; while the mournful voice of Mr. Jackson persisted:

"Oh, why doesn't somebody go and get the milk? *Why* doesn't somebody go and get the milk? Am I to lie here like a dog, gasping for a drop of tea, and nobody to go and get the milk? Oh Irene, why don't you go and get the milk?"

Downstairs, Mrs. Barker said, very audibly:

"Edna, go and tell Paula breakfast's ready."

Paula felt like a morsel of drowsiness sandwiched between remorseless layers of unrest. She cried out at the top of her voice:

"All right! Be down in a minute!"

"Edna, call Paula," said Mrs. Barker.

"Paula! Paula! Paula!" shrieked Edna.

"I'm coming!" screamed Paula.

"Paula, are you deaf?"

"I'm *coming*, I tell you!" Paula struggled into her dressing-gown. She heard Edna's footsteps mount seven stairs, and Edna's voice call:

"Paula! Paul-a!"

"I told you, I'm coming down now!"

"Well, you might have answered the first time!"

With an inarticulate mutter of rage, Paula went down to breakfast.

(2)

Out of the sea of life, strange monstrosities spring; between the boundaries of the classes, curious mutations occur; men become freaks merely by keeping their eyes on false ideals.

Mr. Barker had been born of a pair of hard-working people. It happened that he was a sickly child, too feeble to be productive. He had been apprenticed to a tradesman, and had thus convinced himself that it is better to exploit than to produce. He learned to associate work with dirt and poverty. Heavy boots, large hands, unshapely trousers, cloth caps, and short haircuts he considered low. Noisy relaxation, loud laughing, vulgar jesting, and glasses of beer he described as common. He was glad that he was short-sighted; it gave him an opportunity to wear pince-nez. He sent his son Douglas, a dullard, to a secondary school—not that the boy might learn anything, but in order that he might associate with nice people. He sent Edna to Stucley College for a few terms—he could not afford the fees, but wanted to hear his daughter speak with a polished accent.

Barker became complacent. His son was a clerk, and knew his manners, and his first daughter spoke very nicely indeed. The baby, Paula, showed great promise. Paula was the clever child. Her education had not cost a penny. She had won scholarships. She mixed with richer girls as with equals, and had a healthy contempt for everything vulgar. Practically speaking, Paula was a lady; put her in Mayfair, and nobody would ever suspect that she originated in Turners Green. It seemed certain that a brilliant future lay before the baby, Paula; it was not too grotesque to hope that she might ultimately marry a tilted man.

Barker felt that he had justified himself. He had achieved the Middle Class. With increasing violence and unshakeable assurance, he propounded the philosophy of his kind. Never mind the casuistry that goes with the business-man's ideal. It amounts to this:—Hard work spells destruction to elegance

and comfort; it is only to be associated with low mentality. You can never make money by mere hard work. Clever men are employers; fools are employees. Fools work for clever men. In a nutshell the apothegm, the entire philosophy in three words, the motto of the swell mobman, the conman, the pimp, the racketeer, the gigolo, the prostitute, the share-pusher, and the business-man with big ideas—*only fools work*.

Hence, I suppose, we must consider the Barker children as fruits of their father's teaching. Douglas, Edna, and Paula were all different, but their proclivities seem to have had a common root. Barker gave them all he had to give, hammered his philosophy into their tender skulls, and died happy.

(3)

"When I was your age," said Mrs. Barker, "I was up and about at six in the morning."

"Now don't start," said Paula.

"I was only telling you, but you won't listen to anybody; no, not you. What with——"

"Let's have a little peace and quiet," begged Edna.

A voice from the shop called in:

"Oi, Ma! Gis a narf a nahnce o' Nosegay!"

Mrs. Barker went to serve this customer and, returning, proceeded:

"You wouldn't think of saving your old mother's legs; no, not you. Well, I don't blame you. When I was your age, I'd of had a nice easy time of it, if I could of found somebody else to run about for me."

"Mother, why do you always give me my eggs half raw?" asked Paula. "You know how I hate eggs half raw!"

"You mix things up," said Edna, "you turn my eggs over, and I do wish you wouldn't."

"Nothing's ever good enough for you girls," said Mrs. Barker. "You ought to be glad of what you get."

"Oh, Paula," said Douglas, "Why did you borrow my dressing-gown?"

"I did not borrow your dressing-gown."

"You must have done."

"Don't be stupid."

"Then it must have been Edna."

"Who, me?" demanded Edna, "I suppose you think I——"

"A boy of your age!" commented Mrs. Barker.

"What d'you mean, a boy of my age?"

Irene came down.

"Oh, good-morning everybody," she said, with the nervous brightness of one about to ask a favour: "marvellous day."

"Hallo, Irene," said Paula. "Go anywhere last night?"

"No, did you?"

"No."

"Ah. Er, Mrs. Barker. D'you think you could lend mother a little sugar?"

"Certainly, dear."

Irene took away ten lumps of sugar in a cup. Conversation ceased. There was a greasy, disagreeable silence, which Douglas was the first to break. He asked, petulantly:

"You know, we really ought to get some serviettes."

"You children! Don't think of anything but your own pleasures; no, not you. Haven't I got enough washing to do as it is, without serviettes? And my poor back breaking. Well, I don't blame you. You've got me to do things for you. As long as you'll miss me a little when I'm gone——"

"Can't we have a little peace?" asked Edna.

"And now *there you go!*" cried Mrs. Barker. "Grumbling and grouching all day long——"

At this moment, Irene's voice was heard, shrill with anger.

"Oswald was looking at me while I was washing!"

"Ooo, I wasn't!"

"You were!"

"Liar!"

"Same to you!"

Mr. Jackson shouted, in a voice expressive of the utmost despair:

"How can a man be expected to shave in cold water? Why is there no hot water? Oh, *why* doesn't Irene get some hot water?"

A little boy dashed into the shop, and demanded, in a dictatorial squeak:

"Comic Cuts 'n a penny torffee!"

Upstairs, a fight was brewing. Mrs. Jackson cried, in a shrill, shivering voice:

"How dare you speak to the boy like that? You little hussy! Be ashamed!"

Mr. Jackson bellowed:

"One of these days I'll end it all!" and Irene replied: "Why wait?"

Thereupon, Mrs. Jackson, backed by Oswald and Mr. Jackson, fell upon Irene and denounced her. There was a chaos of collective verbiage. Irene retreated. She came into the shop-parlour, weeping.

"One of these days," she said, for the fiftieth time, "I'll run away from everything. . . . Oh . . . oh . . . just run—run away to some quiet place—away—away from everybody——"

Mrs. Jackson followed her, and explained:

"My Irene's not really a *bad* girl, Mrs. Barker; just foolish and thoughtless. In her temper, she says things she doesn't mean."

"I mean everything I say!" sobbed Irene.

"You bad girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Jackson. "You're wicked to the backbone!"

Another little boy clattered into the shop on hobnailed boots, and shouted:

"Oi, missis—got any empty boxes?"

A third little boy, accompanied by three little girls, spent five minutes in surveying the stock, and finally, with the air of one who makes a momentous decision, bought a halfpenny stick of liquorice and a halfpennyworth of aniseed balls.

A superannuated gentleman came in and said:

"I see, by your advertisement outside, that you stock Dan Leno Cigars, at twopence apiece." And when Mrs. Barker explained, at great length, that Dan Leno cigars had ceased to exist some twenty years before, but that *Miraculoso Perfectos* were the finest procurable at threepence each, he cried: "I wouldn't pay threepence for a cigar, not if it was made of gold!"

Paula lit a cigarette.

"A girl of your age ought not to smoke," said Mrs. Barker.

"Let alone take cigarettes out of the stock without paying for them," said Douglas.

Paula decided to be injured.

"I suppose you begrudge me every bit of food I eat in the house!" she cried; carefully slammed the door, stamped up to her room, knocked over a chair, locked her door, and placidly finished her cigarette.

II

THE GIRLS



BUT even after Paula's cigarette was finished there was still internecine warfare on the floor above. On this Sunday morning—as on all other mornings—nothing had gone right. Oswald had found a fly in the milk, and seemed to think that Irene had put it there to disgust him. Mr. Jackson claimed that his tea tasted of fish, despite the incontrovertible fact that there had been no fish in the house for weeks. In support of his complaint, Mr. Jackson waved a teaspoon.

"Smell that spoon! Pfouf! Fishy! Smell that spoon! Is it fishy, or is it not?"

"Of course not," said Irene, handing the spoon to Alfred. "Is it?"

"No," said Alfred.

"You're all getting together to try and prove I'm mad!" cried Mr. Jackson. "You want to get rid of me. Oh, it's a hard thing, to bring up children and then have them plotting and planning to put you away! Say what you like, it's a hard thing."

"But, dear," said Mrs. Jackson, "we haven't had any fish for ever such a long time."

"Precious little of anything," said Oswald.

"It's just the smell of the metal," said Alfred, "a lot of spoons smell like that."

"You'd swear your father's life away!" cried Mr. Jackson.

Then, when he began to shave, a new atrocity came to light. Somebody had been using his razor.

"Oh, why do people tamper with my personal property? Why can't people buy their own razor-blades? Oswald, why did you use my razor, why did you *do* it?"

"Who, me? I never touched it!"

"Then Alfred, why did *you* do it?"

"Got my own razor."

"Must have been Irene," said Oswald.

"What, me?"

"Yes, you; shaving under your arms."

"Oh, oh, Irene! What did you go and do a thing like that for? Irene? To go and do a thing like that——"

"I did not!"

"You must have done. Otherwise, how else could a new blade get blunt so quick? It's a scandal, it's a crying scandal! Pooh, disgusting! That's how barber's rash starts. Irene! Can you look me straight in the face after using *my* razor to shave off—ugh! No! This is the limit! I've put up with——"

"I did *not* use your beastly razor, father!"

"Now there you go again, trying to tell me black's white, trying to contradict the evidence of my own senses, you wicked girl you; you'd swear your own father's life away, your own father what bore you——"

"Nobody touched your razor, dear!"

"You too! You want to get me out of the way too! I always thought there was something mighty suspicious about the way—there's somebody else in the offing, eh? You——"

"Darling! Ssh!"

"*What* did you say?"

"Only 'ssh!' dear."

"You mean more than that. I know what word you were going to use! I know what filthy word you were going to come out with! There's vulgarity, if you like!"

Mr. Jackson lathered his chin. He shaved only on Sunday. He had one of those beards that might be removed with tweezers; a feeble crop of about a hundred hairs, springing out of a waxy, ill-nourished skin.

He was an egg-like man with marasmic limbs; not a business-man like Mr. Barker, just one of Nature's aristocrats. He had detected, in his profile, something that reminded him of some Earl or other, and that, together with his hands, had been the ruin of him. He had lank, tapering hands, which he

regarded as simply too beautiful to use, and had treated them as silly old women treat their best night-dresses—he had put them away to be buried in. He had lost his job soon after the birth of his eldest child, and had never been able to find in himself sufficient energy to look for any more employment. He had grown more genteel every day. His wife had taken in washing, and had even gone out to scrub other women's floors, but this aroused in Jackson no sense of shame. He had remarked: "A nice thing to come down to!" It seemed to him that he had married beneath him, thrown himself away; decided that he was poor because other people envied him; became a martyr, eternally persecuted. People fell downstairs because they knew how he hated noise; people cut their fingers purposely, to sicken him with the sight of blood.

It was Mrs. Jackson who had kept the home together. Until the children were old enough to go out to work, she had done this by menial labour. They had occupied the Barkers' top floor for six years. There had been frightful struggles to pay the rent, and to buy food. Mrs. Jackson lacked gentility. She had always been too busy to acquire airs or to assert her individuality. She was neither bleached nor elegant. She was earth-coloured—you might have considered her as a piece of good, exhausted soil upon which weeds thrived—bent with too much work, and misshapen with accouchement under trying conditions. She was docile. She had always been too tired to argue; and besides, she had a firm belief in the superiority of her husband. She thought of her damp little three-room flat as one might think of an achieved impossibility—it was, actually, a higher achievement than many works of art. Looking at her knotty, greyish fingers, she would think, with a kind of wonder: "Just with these, I kept the roof over our heads for so long!"

But Mr. Jackson did all the talking. He would tell you:

"I have been unfortunate. God alone knows how much I've suffered and borne; poverty, humiliation, sickness. But whatever has happened, I've always seen my children fed, and a roof above us!"

Now, having cautiously scraped off all the week's accumulation of beard, Mr. Jackson continued:

"And I've tried so hard to keep you all from sinking low! And what do I get for it? Nothing but common abuse——"

"Nobody's been abusing you," said Irene.

"Irene, don't you chime in!" said Mrs. Jackson.

"She must have her say," said Oswald.

Irene glared at him. He sniggered. They engaged.

"What d'you mean, 'she must have her say'? You miserable little worm——"

"Same to you, with knobs on!"

"All you think about is lying in bed all day long, and scrounging pennies off your mother. Don't you dare——"

"Bow-wow-wow!"

"Why don't you go and find a job?"

"Why don't *you*?"

"I've got a job—I've worked hard enough, while you've done nothing."

"I'm a brain-worker."

"Brain-worker! I've seen insects with more brains."

"You're only a common shopgirl, anyway."

"You're glad enough to live on one, then!"

"Ooo! Mother, did you hear what Irene said? Am I here to be insulted? Am I here to be mocked at?"

"Irene!" cried Mrs. Jackson. "Will you stop teasing the boy, at once? Can't you leave him be for five minutes?"

"Me? Oh, mother——"

"She passed remarks——"

"You liar, it was——"

"Oh God!" shouted Mr. Jackson, "I'm tired of this! I'm going to do away with myself, I'm going to end it all! I am! I am!" He flourished the safety-razor.

"No! No!" shrieked Mrs. Jackson.

"Gimme the bread-knife!" demanded Mr. Jackson. "Pass me over the bread-knife!"

Alfred, hardened to such abortive suicidal outbursts, thoughtlessly handed over a pointless knife with a serrated

edge. His father took it, gazed at it, threw it away, and bellowed:

"Now deny that you want to get me out of the way! Go on, deny it! Oh, oh, you ungrateful beasts! I tell you, on my word of honour, one of these days I'll end it all, just give up the struggle, and then you'll be sorry all right!"

"You're breaking my heart!" said Irene, with lofty sarcasm. Then she burst into tears, ran out of the room, and went downstairs to Paula.

(2)

Florrie Oxborrow, also, had come to tell Paula her troubles. Florrie had many troubles. She was twenty-three; a dangerous age. It is too gross a generalisation to specify any one dangerous age for girls. Roughly speaking, any age after puberty is dangerous; as soon as a girl becomes attractive to men, she is in danger—and so, for that matter, are the men she attracts. Girls of the middle classes, however, seem to develop a pronounced diathesis to amorous surrender at the age of twenty-three, or thereabout; having been excited by contact with various men, having learned a thing or two, having conceived a profound desire to learn more, and being plaintively nubile, they tend to go off the deep end at the slightest provocation. Statistics of elopements and illegitimate births will bear me out.

Florrie Oxborrow was full of revolt. Born of a brace of ardent Wesleyans, she had been reared in a belief that amusement could not be dissociated from sin. Everything that was not unpleasant led to hell. Her parents lived in an orgy of mortification of the flesh; attended chapel regularly, prohibited cosmetics, cinemas, dances, alluring clothes, and all frivolity. A dark, full-blooded girl who had matured early, Florrie was caught in the grip of terrible desires and forbidden imaginings. She was constantly feeling ashamed

of herself, and found peace of mind and self-confidence only in Paula's company. Paula maintained quite openly that a good time was all that mattered. Paula was emancipated. She had a glib tongue, and a faculty for explaining things away. To Florrie, trained in the narrower back-alleys of Christian sectarianism, a good time meant wickedness. With the nervous impulsiveness that is characteristic of the emotional woman, she openly defied certain of the laws laid down by her father. One day she announced her intention of going to a dance, and went. One Sunday, she flatly refused to go to chapel. She admitted that she had gone for a motor-cycle ride with a boy. Her father could already see her in hell. Her mother assured her that she would come to a terrible end. It was an understood thing that all the good Wesleyans would look down from Paradise, and see Florrie Oxborrow writhing on a grid in the sulphurous fire of the Pit. She felt that they were probably right, and began to live with a kind of desperation; if she could never play a celestial harp, she would, at least, strum on a terrestrial ukulele. She retained her virginity, but petted avidly on park benches; smoked cigarettes; could drink two glasses of port without getting drunk; walked with a Garbo slouch; occasionally said "Damn", and "Blast", and considered herself a lost soul.

She occupied the foot of Paula's bed, sprawling, displaying her strong, rounded legs. She threw away the end of her cigarette. Edna, from the arm-chair by the fireplace, followed the falling cigarette-end with her eyes; her housewifely instincts urged her to go and pick it up, but her desire to be one of the girls held her back. Compromising, she determined to pick up all the cigarette-ends when the others had gone. But Paula, relaxing, called to Irene to sit down, and went on talking.

"Well, so what happened then, Florrie?"

"Nothing much," said Florrie, "you know how they try to get fresh. . . . I don't know, I don't know what to think of men, sometimes. They all try to take liberties. What do you think, Paula?"

"Why, my dear, of course they try it on. That's just the fun. Let them *try*."

"I don't think it's any fun, leading boys up the garden," said Edna. "A little . . . flirtation, well, there's no harm in that. But unless a boy's serious, it's a waste of time, I think."

"Oh, I don't know," said Florrie, slowly.

"It depends who's serious," said Irene.

"There's something in that." Paula blew away cigarette-ash with a judicial air. "The whole point is, to make the right sort of person sufficiently serious. Some girls are so *silly*. All they think about is getting a husband, any sort of husband. Their ambitions don't rise very high. And others, well, as soon as they see a man, all their thoughts go—*down there*."

"Paula!" said Edna.

Florrie blushed. Paula went on:

"I mean to say, when you come to think of it, women are so stupid. They just throw themselves away. I simply can't imagine why any decent-looking woman should want to tie herself to one man for life. One man, mind you, for life. No woman in her right mind would do such a thing."

"Most women do," said Edna, defensively.

"Most people, my dear, aren't in their right minds," said Paula, "how can they be? Is it sane to go and slave yourself to death for one man who gets bored with you—washing his horrible pants, and darning his socks, and having his babies, and staying at home while he goes out, or staying in with him night after night, year in, year out? I ask you! What do you get for it? Nothing but your board and lodging, and an occasional new hat. Mind you, I can understand a woman marrying *somebody*, but not just any able-bodied man with about a fiver a week."

"Perhaps it's because they fall in love," suggested Florrie.

"Quite right," said Irene.

"Now there's another thing outside my aim in life." Paula spoke with the voice of age-old experience. "Fall in love! All this sentiment. Your idea of falling in love is nothing but domestic slavery. I'd never fall in love with a man."

"How d'you know?" asked Edna.

"How do I know? You don't know me! I don't regard men like that. Even if I started to fall in love with a man, I'd stop myself. I tell you, once you fall in love with a man, you're finished. He's got you. You're not your own boss any more; you sell yourself into slavery. I'd never let any man . . . make love to me, never!"

"But don't you ever *want* to?" asked Florrie, incredulously.

"Well, I have wanted to. But I soon got over wanting to. It's just a matter of self-control. All you have to do is think of the consequences."

"A woman should have self-respect," declared Edna.

"You needn't have babies," said Florrie.

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of that. What I mean is, once you've had a man, you can't go without. It becomes a habit. It gets you nowhere. Once men know that they only have to . . . caress you a bit, to make you feel——"

"Yes, I know," said Florrie.

"Well, I mean, once they can do that, they've got you. You can never be sure of yourself. Myself, I would never dream of risking it. What you've never had, you never miss. You can ask Irene, she'll tell you."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said Irene. "You can do without. It's quite easy to be good, really."

"Of course it is," said Edna, "you simply don't think of such things."

"Yes," said Paula, "when you're alone. But if you were, say, sitting on a big, soft divan by a fire, with a very attractive man trying to make love to you, could you honestly be sure of yourself?"

"Well . . . I don't know . . ."

"Couldn't you?" asked Florrie.

"Well . . . I don't know. . . . You know how it is, you sort of——" Irene twiddled all her fingers.

"I understand," said Florrie.

"Anyway," declared Edna, "I don't see the harm in

being married. You can't go on like that all the time, just fooling, and never being serious. Where can *that* get you?"

"My dear," said Paula, with languor, resting her exquisite face against the pillow, "it can get you ever such a long way, if you know how to go about it."

"Just by having a good time?" asked Florrie.

"Um. If you take great care not to let yourself go. You can have a good time without sex. Sex is like a drug, just like cocaine. If you can master it, you can have a lot of power, but if you become an addict, you're a fool."

"How d'you mean, master it?" asked Florrie, her cheeks hot.

"Well, . . ." Paula spoke slowly and clearly: "A doctor has a lot of power, really, because he knows just how things affect people. A doctor might, say, sell cocaine; he might make a man his slave, just by *holding back* cocaine. With drugs, a man has to get the habit; but as far as women are concerned, every man *has* the habit. You have to learn how to handle them, and how to control yourself."

"Still," cried Irene, "we can't all be like that. What use is life, really, without love? You've got to have real love, to make life worth living."

"I think so too," said Florrie, while Edna nodded her approval. But Paula laughed.

"My dear!" she said.

"Irene ought to know," said Edna.

"Just because she's had one or two men?" asked Paula.

"One, only one," corrected Edna, "wasn't it Irene?"

"Yes, only one," said Irene, sighing.

"Was it——" Florrie checked the word "nice", and substituted: "Was it worth it?"

"Yes, I think so," said Irene.

"You make me laugh," said Paula, "you turn to Irene as an authority, just because of a love affair. But would you think a man was fully experienced, if he'd only had one affair in his life? Of course you wouldn't. Men are just as

complicated as women, my dear. You make a study of men, as I do, and you'll see! Myself, I've never had an affair, but I bet you——"

"Yes, but Paula," protested Florrie, "a girl can't go all her life without . . ."

"Sex?"

"Um, well, yes, sex if you like."

"I don't know about sex," said Edna, "I never think of such a thing myself; but a home——"

"A home!" cried Paula. "A few arm-chairs on the hire-purchase system, and tub-full of babies' nappies! What a price to sell yourself for! The thing to do is keep men at arm's length, make them keep running after you without ever catching you; you can get much more that way."

"Paula, I think you're being perfectly horrible!" said Edna.

"But can you keep men at arm's length all the time?" asked Florrie.

"Of course you can, if you use your head. I could give you quite a few examples myself."

"But say you *like* a man?" asked Florrie.

"Want him ever so much," said Irene.

"Yes, say you fall in love," said Edna.

"You mustn't," said Paula, simply. "It's when you think you're going to like a man that you have to watch your step, and regard him as an enemy. While you're indifferent to a man, it's all right, but as soon as he begins to attract you, he's your enemy. The ideal course is to make men like you, without liking them."

"But what for?" asked Edna.

Paula replied, frankly and without shame:

"For what you can get out of them. Men only run after women for what *they* can get. Women should do likewise."

"But it's not right. I don't call that honest," said Edna.

"My dear, all that honour-of-women stuff was invented by men, for their own advantage," replied Paula, "just as the Church invented morals."

"You're right there," said Florrie.

"And I tell you, almost any woman can learn to have power over men, if only she keeps a clear head. Every woman in the world has at least one thing that endears her to all men——"

Florrie reddened; Irene nodded bitterly; Edna, lighting a cigarette, coughed with unnecessary vehemence.

"——And once a man is on the hunt, why, a little child could lead him. The woman only has to keep aloof, and the man just ties himself up. Women are naturally reticent, at first," said Paula, in an icy, drawling voice, "but, my dear, men are so *ardent*!"

But Edna, with an air of sisterly understanding said:

"Dear old Paula! She always could talk. If we didn't know her now! If she meant a tenth of the things she says, she'd be a terrible girl, wouldn't she? It's a good thing we understand her so well. She might give a stranger a *terrible* impression!"

Paula merely smiled.

(3)

After tea, Florrie went home, and Edna went with Arthur Todd to the Sunday evening gathering of the Literary and Debating Society. Having unburdened her soul of its most recent sorrows, Irene took her leave of Paula.

"It's nice of you, Paula, to listen to all my nonsense. I must bore you stiff, but you seem so clever and understanding. I don't know, I sort of fly to you for protection, just as if you were a man. You're so self-possessed, and clever, and cool. Really, well . . . I don't know. I don't know what I'd do without you. If it wasn't for you, I'd get so miserable, I'd probably end it all."

"Oh, don't be silly. Going anywhere?"

"Cinema, perhaps. I don't know. Are you?"

"I promised to go out with that Yates boy."

"Max Yates? He's supposed to be a dangerous sort of fellow, isn't he? All the girls fall for him, and he's supposed to be dreadfully immoral."

"Yes, it'll be rather fun."

"But I thought you didn't like——"

"Oh, I mean it'll be rather fun watching him try his wiles, and only succeed in getting himself all worked up. Anything does to practise on."

"You must be awfully cold, Paula."

"I am. I intend to be. I've got ambitions, my dear."

"Well . . . bye-bye, Paula darling."

"Fool!" commented Paula, to herself.

An hour later, Paula boarded a Piccadilly bus with Max Yates. Yates was a suburban Valentino, who had a way with women; tall, dark, and handsome; an exponent of the Tango, with a romantic hat, and a moustache which might have been—and possibly was—a line drawn with an eyebrow-pencil; a wrecker of homes, versed in the jiu-jitsu of seduction and the catch-as-catch-can of amorous promiscuity, to whom a woman was so much plasticine; the Great Lover of Turners Green, a hell of a fellow.

He pressed Paula's arm. Paula smiled.

To a discriminating third party, it might have been apparent that Max Yates had suddenly become an ingenuous innocent gallivanting on thin ice, in the clutches of a young woman with an ancient soul and a bloodless curiosity—a guinea-pig in the hands of a biologist—a fish on a line.

"Beautiful one," murmured Max Yates, "let's go places, and see things."

Paula's forefinger lightly touched the palm of his hand; his fingers closed on hers. She touched his adjacent foot; the foot immediately rose and pressed against the toe of her shoe.

There was, about all this, an inevitability that bored her, and reminded her of marionettes.

She gazed at him, and touched his knee. She leaned against him so that her ear was near his lips, and she could hear his breathing. Two and two make four; fire and water make

steam. Max Yates breathed more heavily. He began to put an arm round her.

"End of round one," thought Paula. She coolly disengaged her hand, withdrew gracefully, and said, in a somewhat horrified voice:

"What *are* you doing? In a bus, too! Mr. Yates!"

"Call me Max. There's nobody looking."

"My dear Max, I don't do this sort of thing on buses."

"Where, then?"

After a pause, Paula threw him an ambiguous glance, and said:

"Nowhere."

Nevertheless, she took his hand again, and Max told himself: "Got her. They all say that at first. Maximilian Yates, that girl's crazy about you!" Aloud, he declared:

"You're the nicest girl I've ever met."

"Thanks awfully," said Paula; and paradoxically, she yawned, and added: "The weather report says it will probably rain . . ."

III

PASTA FLAVA



IRENE JACKSON was a saleslady in Mirliton's showroom. Mirliton was a designer of hats, a little French gentleman who took hats seriously. To him, a hat was the crowning triumph of civilisation. He claimed that the designing of women's hats was a fine art—he used about as much emotional energy in the tying up of six pennyworth of ribbon as a Titian might have used in the painting of a great picture. Mirliton would stick a pin into a beret with the breathless trepidation of a man pulling the pin out of a Mills-bomb. A quarter of an inch in the diameter of a brim was enough to give him hysterics; the dimensions of a diamanté buckle could give him a migraine; an argument about the difference between felt and velours could prostrate him with nervous diarrhoea. He felt that he had only to touch a hat to turn it into a masterpiece.

Male milliners, like male dressmakers, are all more or less ridiculous.

Mirliton's shop was in Bond Street. It was furnished with a few chairs, two tables, and three ash-trays. The window was vast; one looked through it into a great dark cube, newly draped with black velvet for the display of Mirliton's latest exclusive creation—a hat exactly like a soup-plate.

On Monday morning, Mirliton's soul always effervesced. He shouted at Irene:

"I struggle! I work! All night, all day. I plan, I create! Last night, I have an inspiration—it comes from God above, right into my brain, like a lightning—a kind of beret, and yet not a beret. How is it possible for me to explain? Nobody would understand. Try and imagine a beret. You imagine

a beret? Very good; now endeavour to conceive a species of tam o' shanter formation localised, you understand, to the right. The whole thing came to me. I could see it more clearly than I see you. I get out of bed, and take a pencil. I think to myself, 'I will fix this idea.' And then it was gone. It had come and gone, just like a dream. You remember my other creations? They came to me in the night. Now this eludes me. A beret, and yet not a beret—ah, bah, that elusive hypertrophy of the right-hand side! You would never understand."

"It'll come back to you," said Irene.

"One of these days I will kill you all," said Mirliton. "A woman who does not understand is like a cow that gives no fruit—an embarrassment to the community! A beret, and yet, my God, not a beret!"

"Don't upset yourself," said Irene.

"Must a man always struggle alone? Must I always be like Atlas, alone on a mountain, supporting the sky? Yes, Mirliton, you are alone. A beret and yet not a beret—try, for one moment, to see before your eyes a beret of grey velvet that is not a beret. A beret—let me explain—a beret, and yet not a beret."

"Well, let me see . . ."

"Go away! You are all alone, Mirliton, solitary and alone; Mirliton the dreamer, alone on a mountain. A beret that is not a beret. The riddle of the Pyramid. A beret. enceinte on the right-hand side; hanging down. Yet not a beret! Now do you see?"

"Well . . ."

"With a bulge. I see you do not understand. Nobody could ever understand. Mirliton, one man alone; lost; wandering alone in the darkness. A beret, and yet not a beret."

At this moment, Pasta Flava came in. She lunged into the shop and grasped Mirliton by an arm.

"Darling," she said, "I've come to buy a hat."

"A fellow artist is always welcome," said Mirliton.

Pasta Flava hurried to the door, and cried:

"Futtercake, pay the taxi! All of you, come inside! I may be hours."

She waved a hand in an imperious gesture. Four men and a woman followed her into the shop.

(2)

In her day, Pasta Flava had been a ballerina. She had specialised in wild abandon; she had always put her heart and soul into everything. She claimed to have pirouetted at such speed that blood had come out of her finger-tips; but this was probably fabulous. It is, however, quite certain that, in one unforgettable Gopak, she had dislocated a shoulder. She had achieved a great deal of notoriety. There was hardly a Balkan monarch who had not, at some time or other, bathed her in champagne. Now, she had run to seed. Her body had aged, but her soul still danced the Cancan among the empty bottles on the table. She was skinny; only her stomach and her face had curves. But she appeared to ignore these devastating facts. She was ugly, but thought that she was still beautiful. Nevertheless, magnanimous in her vanity, while she felt that all other women hated and envied her, she forgave them, and was even prepared to love them. While she seldom spoke the truth, Pasta Flava was not actually a liar; she was a story-teller, who constantly gazed beyond reality into the lurid Apocrypha of her past. The theatre was in her blood. She aimed her every gesture and remark at an imaginary gallery. Nurtured on flattery and lies, she found life impossible without applause. And wherever she went, she took with her her claque.

There was Petroneli, an acrobat; cropped, bull-necked, and monosyllabic, squat and powerful, with a chest like a bushel-basket. His head was solid, but rudimentary. He resembled some not very lifelike carving in red sandstone, imperfectly animated. He followed Pasta Flava because she paid for his drinks. Her words were lost and neutralised in his mental

processes, like bullets in a sack of putty. Petroneli's friend, and fellow hanger-on, was Simson the Samson. Imagine a blond rhinoceros with milky blue eyes and an air of naïve wonder; such was Simson the Samson, a wrestler, who should have been working on the land. He would have made a good plough-horse. He was unemotional, but when pleased had the appearance of a man trying to laugh with an orange in his mouth; without vices or virtues, too stupid to be dishonest, and too dull to be unchaste; never got drunk because his nervous system was unaffected by alcohol; and, since swearing involves a certain amount of mental excitation, never swore. Theirs was a silent friendship. They had nothing to say.

There was Dita Fisher, an ancient dancing-instructress. She was tall and lank, with the greenish complexion of a whitlow; dressed in a shiny, jet-black, crackling material like carbon-paper; had prominent grey eyes, like bubbles filled with smoke, and habitually carried a large crocodile-skin bag decorated with claws, which was said to contain all her worldly possessions. She was always armed with an umbrella; a long, slender umbrella, the head of which was an ivory ring, through which she threaded her attenuated right arm.

There was Futtercake, a bad lad of the nineties in an advanced state of decomposition; red all over, stupid, obese, and incoherent. He drank so that he might have been hollow. He sounded hollow; his voice had the noise of a muffled drum, gently beaten somewhere in his stomach, and reverberating in the empty, echoing cavity of his skull. Whenever he spoke, his friends laughed—his words were indistinguishable, but it was taken for granted that they were meant to be funny. He dressed boyishly, and had his hair waved. If Colonel Bulba called him "Comrade in arms", it must have been in gentle irony.

Colonel Volodia Bulba was a White Russian, rather shop-soiled, and considerably the worse for wear. It was difficult to imagine him as a mere parasite; there was something vaguely noble about the man. He was of moderate height,

fair, with prominent cheek-bones and ash-coloured hair. Bulba was covered with scars, Russian scars of glorious failure. He had fought against Fate, and was supposed to have retreated with every Russian General of recent times. He brought away from Mukden a Japanese bullet in his left lung and a piece of bomb in his right thigh; there were three sabre-scars on his head, sustained in Irkutsk; a bullet-pucker in his cheek, from Murmansk; a knife-thrust in his stomach, from another of Koltchak's retreats, and a score of minor wounds besides. Whatever Bulba did, he was certain to get hurt. It appeared that whatever the Japanese, the Germans, or the Bolsheviks had fired at, Bulba had always managed to get in the way. His broken nose marked one of the few occasions when he had been the pursuer and not the pursued—he had been kicked in the face by a retreating horse. Perhaps his nobility of character lay in his doggedness; there is always something admirable about a man who is dead but won't lie down. Now, Bulba looked tired. He seemed in desperate need of comfort and rest. Whenever he sat down, he appeared to have spent a day and a night on that spot. He was always bedraggled, and covered with little specks of fluff, as if he had slept in his clothes. He quoted anecdotes; ate if food was available, but fasted with equanimity; was punctilious in his courtesy, and liked Pasta Flava for herself, as well as for her whisky. There was sentiment between them. In 1904 he had seen her in Moscow, and had fallen in love with her; and a quarter of a century later they had met again in London, when they were both decayed. By some freak of memory, she had not forgotten his face. I think he loved her because she had not forgotten him.

He stood at attention in the forefront of the group. His right hand clutched the brim of a grimy grey hat; in his left he gently held Pasta Flava's moth-eaten mink necklet.

(3)

"Darling," said Pasta Flava, "I want a hat. Something extraordinary, it must be something extraordinary."

"Madame, all my hats are extraordinary," said Mirliton. "Shall we say something like *La Maitresse du Curé*? A creation in vieux rose." He darted to a stand, and returned with a kind of pink shovel-hat in watered silk: "Conceived, Madame, in a Voltairian moment—the ultimate expression of free thought."

"What do you think of that, Petroneli?" asked Pasta Flava.

"No good."

Pasta Flava shrieked with laughter. She snatched the hat from Mirliton, and said:

"Petroneli darling, try it on!"

"Vat for?"

"Because I want you to."

"I am not a fancy-boy to put on vimmen's hats. I am not a fume-actor."

Pasta Flava placed the hat on Petroneli's cropped head, and became helpless. She held her sides and gasped for breath.

"Darling," she exclaimed, "you remind me of General Booth."

"Madame, my creations are for ladies, not for gentlemen. I have one here, a little daring, that expresses the very spirit of the unconventional. *Le Lesbos*—Irene, bring *Le Lesbos*! And again, my masterpiece, the only remaining copy of *Le Spleen de Mirliton*. Eugenie, bring *Le Spleen de Mirliton*. Madame, you are of a melancholy disposition. You constantly see through the shallowness of life, and you are melancholy. *Le Spleen de Mirliton* is for you, it expresses your inner soul."

"Yes, I am melancholy," said Pasta Flava, shaking her head. "Too much thinking has been the ruin of me. Once, I argued with Nietzsche for seventeen hours on end, on the top of Mont Blanc. He committed suicide shortly after.

He said 'Pasta Flava, now you have made me realise that my life has been in vain.' Or it may have been Haeckel. Do you call that a hat?"

"Madame, it is a perfect conventionalisation of the form of the spleen, an internal organ near the liver. It is to be worn over the ears."

"Bulba," said Pasta Flava, adjusting the hat, "what do you think of it?"

"Perhaps something a little brighter?" murmured Bulba.

"You see?" cried Pasta Flava, "Bulba is always right. Something a little brighter——"

"Irene! Irene!" cried Mirliton, "Where is *Le Lesbos*? Fool, you have brought me *Crachat de Poumon*! One of these days I will kill you all. I am alone here. Nobody can help me. Mirliton, alone with his conceptions, eh? Madame, I call you to witness, this fool has brought me *Crachat de Poumon*, a creation conceived and designed expressly for the heads of consumptives——" He indicated a limp, purple hat: "Grim, dark, pathological, expressive of the tortured lung. I spent three days in a hospital in order to arrive at the local colour."

"It looks as if it might be catching," said Pasta Flava, sitting down and forgetting about hats. "Mirliton, don't *I* inspire you? I inspire lots of people. I inspired Marx. Once he was only a low comedian. I said to him: 'Karl, darling, for God's sake, break away. *Do* something! Earn the respect of posterity, not the plaudits of the mob. *Do* something!' So he broke away from Harpo, and went into politics. He inspired Engels. It was the Archbishop of Canterbury who said, afterwards: 'Not Engels, darling, but *angels*!' It was all my doing."

"Madame, nobody could inspire me," said Mirliton, "I am alone. Nobody could ever understand. Mirliton, alone. Here is *Le Lesbos*."

"Permit me, Moddom," said Irene, arranging the hat on Pasta Flava's head.

"Rather sweet!" cried Dita. "Eh, Mr. Futtercake?"

Futtercake nodded. Pasta Flava gravely contemplated the hat—a kind of yellow trilby with a brown band—and pulled it down over her eyes.

“Nice, eh? Doggy, don’t you think?”

“Possibly a little masculine,” said Bulba. “You are so essentially feminine.”

“Take this hat away!” cried Pasta Flava. “Mirliton, how could you dare! Don’t stand there leering at me! Find me a hat, at once!”

“Madame——”

“At *once!*” Pasta Flava became capricious. She stamped her feet, and brandished a fist in Mirliton’s face. “Hurry! I’m a busy woman.” She patted Bulba’s cheek with a soft, affectionate hand: “I can always rely on Bulba. Faithful hound! When everybody else betrays me, and sells me, Bulba will always be by my side. To offer me a masculine hat! I am Pasta Flava. The Grand Duke Jaroslav called me ‘Ballerina of my soul, who dances a wild Tchaban on my heart.’ Mirliton, never offer me a masculine hat again. Show me something frilly.”

“Irene!” snapped Mirliton, in an evil temper. “Bring me *Blanche, Vénus emerge*—at once!” He waved his hands, and Irene ran.

“That is not the way to speak to a lady,” said Bulba, stiffly.

“True,” said Pasta Flava, with intense sympathy, “only too true. All men are beasts. You especially, Mirliton. You think women are your slaves. Loved and then thrown away. What’s that girl’s name?”

“Irene,” said Mirliton.

“Yes, I know, Irene. Irene! Come here!”

“Moddom?”

“Don’t you care, darling. I’m standing by you. Do you hear? Pasta Flava is your friend. Do you see, Irene darling? Pasta Flava is the friend of the oppressed. Don’t let him throw you away. Don’t make yourself cheap—I never did. Do you love him?”

“Who, Monsieur Mirliton, Moddom?”

"Yes, that fat wretch."

"Good gracious, no, Moddom!"

"Madame!" cried Mirliton, "Pray do me the honour of understanding that my relations with my employees are all that they should be!"

"They all say that," murmured Dita.

"This hat, Madame, is one of my more frivolous ventures. It was created in the Spring. It embodies the spirit of perpetual youth. *Blanche, Vénus emerge*. It is from Verlaine. *Blanche, Vénus emerge, et c'est la nuit!*" chanted Mirliton.

"What do you mean, perpetual youth?" asked Dita. "Are you suggesting Pasta Flava needs to look younger, when everybody knows she's younger-looking——"

"That's all right," sighed Pasta Flava, "let him mock at me, and deride me, and point the finger of scorn at me. It's quite all right. I am a broken-down old woman, pilloried, exposed to the insults of the mob. Swine! I'm not a minute older than forty! Everybody admits that I look the same as I was when I danced before the Czar in 1902, and I was only twenty-one then! Mirliton——"

"Madame!" cried Mirliton, tearing his hair. "You misunderstand me!"

"It may be that Monsieur Mirliton was referring only to the hat," suggested Bulba.

"Even you!" cried Pasta Flava, reproachfully. "Even you! Let me try on the hat and go."

The white and complicated shape of *Blanche, Vénus emerge* perched precariously on her nodding head.

"It will show the dirt," said Bulba.

"Darling," said Pasta Flava, "forgive me for what I said just now. I didn't mean it."

"I have already forgotten it," said Bulba.

"Ha! That's all the notice you take of me. Never mind. Forget. Just forget. You forgive me, also, Mirliton."

"Madame, to a fellow-artist, I can forgive everything."

"Wagner said that, too," said Pasta Flava, brightening. "He said 'Darling, to a fellow-artist, one can forgive every-

thing.' It may have been Wagner, I'm not quite clear."

"Or Beethoven?" murmured Mirliton, with irony.

"Perhaps Beethoven," said Pasta Flava.

Futtercake cleared his throat noisily.

"Yes, Futtercake; or even Bach," said Pasta Flava, in complete agreement.

Irene timorously handed over a tiny yellow hat, which Mirliton placed in position among Pasta Flava's unruly hair.

"How the devil can I keep it on?" asked Pasta Flava, laughing. "Darling! How stupid! It reminds me of Paderewski. I once said to him: 'Paderewski, darling, I dare you to walk along the Marszalkowska—it was in Warsaw—with a chamber-pot on your head.' But he did, and got arrested, poor dear."

"That vas not Paderewski," grunted Petroneli, "that vas me."

"Well, you darling, what's the difference?"

"You did not dare me, you betted me von hundred zloty, ant you haf never paid me."

"Well, I bailed you out, anyway. You see, Mirliton, they all love me; they'd do anything for me. And I love them, too. I love even you, Mirliton, even though you worry and persecute this sweet little thing here—" Irene blushed—"I love her, too. Irene, darling, take this hat away, there's a sweet pet, and find me something else. Oh, Irene, when's your birthday?"

"August the eleventh, Moddom."

"Don't call me Moddom, in that idiotic way, or I'll spit right in your confounded eye. Call me Pasta Flava. Go on, call me Pasta Flava."

"Pasta Flava," murmured Irene.

"That's a good girl. Just speak to me as if you'd known me for years—be familiar. Let's all be friendly."

"Come, come, hurry, hurry!" said Mirliton.

"You take your time," said Pasta Flava to Irene, "and don't take any notice of him."

"Madame! I beg of you—allow me, I implore you, if you will be so kind—permit me to handle my staff in my own way!"

"You and your own way! Love 'em and leave 'em, that's your way! Now what sort of a hat is this?" Pasta Flava picked up an object that resembled a squashed flower-pot, or a deep pie dish. She banged it on rapidly, and looked at her reflection in the long mirror. "Tell me, Mirliton, what do you think?"

"Madame, that hat is not your type. I would recommend——"

Irene returned with a small pink hat. Pasta Flava called to her:

"Darling! How d'you like this one?"

"I think it's perfectly sweet!" said Irene.

"There!" said Pasta Flava, "And *she* ought to know, Mirliton; it's her business to know. Not another word, I'll take this one! Mirliton, wrap it up and send it."

"Very good, Madame," said Mirliton, in a frenzy of suppressed rage, "Very good, very good."

"And don't forget, let Irene bring it!" cried Pasta Flava. "Irene, remember! If anybody else brings it, I'll spit right in their confounded eye and send the hat back. Do you hear?"

"Yes, Madame. The price——"

"Now don't start dunning me, and nagging the life out of me for your miserable cheque. Have I ever failed to pay, in the end? Very good, then. Irene, darling, you would like to bring me my hat, wouldn't you?"

"Why, certainly, Moddom."

"Pasta Flava, not Moddom. I knew you'd like to bring it. They all love Pasta Flava. They all want to serve her. You're a sweet little thing, Irene darling, and I love you very much. Be round at five, and have some tea with us, yes?" Pasta Flava raised her hand in a wide, magnificent gesture, and smiled with ineffable sweetness. "God bless you all." Then she became imperious again: "Bulba! Futtercake! Dita! Petroneli! Simson! Come along!" And she swept out of the

shop, followed by her bodyguard; battered planetoids in the wake of a forgotten star.

But as soon as she was gone, Mirliton's anger burst. He shrieked at Irene:

"Ah, non! I have enough! Mirliton, your own servants turn against you! *Tu es tout seul*, Mirliton! One man against the gods! Treacherous woman! Mother of lies! You must take the hat, ah? You alone, yes? Very good, take the hat, and never come back."

"But Monsieur Mirliton——"

"Enough! It is final! You are discharged! Get your hat and coat, and go. Packer, Pasta Flava's hat, in a pink box! Cashier, Pasta Flava's bill, and a week's wages for Irene Jackson! Packer, fool, I said a pink box! Only an animal would pack a pink hat in a blue box! . . . *Voilà*, the hat, the bill; your wages one, two pounds ten shillings. Your insurance cards. Fail to deliver the hat by five o'clock, and I inform the police. You shall not escape me! Get out of my sight. If I see you again, I will kill you! It would not be the first time that a great man has died for a worthless woman. *Va! File!*"

"But it wasn't my fault——"

"*Psst!*"

Irene left the shop with Pasta Flava's hat in a pink box, and tears in her eyes.

IV

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS



"IT iss Miss Pasta Flava you wish to see?" asked an ancient Welsh housemaid, looking dubiously at the hatbox.

"Yes, please. Tell her it's Irene, from Mirliton's."

"A bill it iss?"

"No, I've brought her hat."

"Step this way, please."

The gloomy solidity of the reception-room filled Irene with terror. It was a small, shadowy room, heavily curtained. Highlights on mahogany and glass met her eye like admonitory glances. From a heavy frame glowered the portrait of a stern old gentleman, ugly with that taut, lumpy ugliness which one associates only with the higher ranks of the Army. On the mantelpiece a little bronze Hercules struggled with a big bronze boar. An immense silver dish bore a coat of arms, and the motto: *Esse quam videri*.

"This way, please," said the housemaid, reappearing like a ghost. Irene followed her, hugging the hatbox. The stairs were dumb with carpet. Irene, accustomed to the squeaking and the creaking of the Barker staircase, found this silence disconcerting; she preferred to hear herself walk.

"Here," said the servant, tapping at a door.

"Darling! For God's sake, come in!" cried a voice.

Irene went into Pasta Flava's bedroom.

Pasta Flava was about to dress. Wearing nothing but slippers, she sat on the edge of the bed, and gazed mournfully at a heap of clothes.

"Irene darling! You're here at last!" she exclaimed. "I've been waiting for you."

"Yes, I've brought your hat."

"Then let me try it on, at once!"

"Don't you think you'd better put on some clothes, first?"

"Well, perhaps you're right." Pasta Flava picked up a yellow evening dress. "What do you say to this one? Yellow, the colour of sunlight. I wore that dress in 1927, and everybody loved me in it."

"Don't you think that something more up-to-date might suit you better, Moddom?"

"Pasta Flava, not Moddom. Everybody is Moddom, but there's only one Pasta Flava. Everybody calls me Pasta Flava. I'm everybody's friend—yours, too, darling, and don't forget it. Whatever happens to you, Pasta Flava will always stand by you. And whatever happens to Pasta Flava, you'll always stand by her, won't you?"

"Of course I will."

"You're a good girl. I haven't got any up-to-date dresses. I've only got the dresses that everybody's used to. Everybody knows me and loves me in these dresses. How can I risk new ones?"

"Then say you start with some undies?"

"Darling, you're marvellous! I forgot all about undies. I thought I'd put them on an hour ago. I was concentrating on my dresses—it always takes me a long time to find the dress that expresses my mood. Now what about this?" She dragged a long, blue, transparent affair from the heap, and held it up for Irene's inspection. "Nice, eh?"

"It's a nightie," said Irene, "and you can't wear a nightie with evening-dress, can you?"

Pasta Flava was contemplating her reflection in the pier-glass. She might have stepped out of some old Japanese colour-print. She might have been one of those grotesque female devils that devour the damned in Oriental hells. Her hair was a crown of yellow flame and her skin was bluish-white, like a badly-starched collar. Her torso seemed to be made up of bags—flaccid and empty at the breasts, but packed to bursting-point at the abdomen. Her limbs were long and wiry; the limbs of the dancer, planed down by time. Her dishevelled head appeared enormous.

She struck an attitude.

"Look, darling; this is the Dying Swan!" She tried to execute that ultimate, tragic curtsy, but collapsed sideways. Lying on the carpet, still looking in the glass, she burst into tears. "Darling, I can't do it any more!"

"Ssh!" said Irene. "Never mind, never mind!"

She helped Pasta Flava to her feet, and then, rummaging in the heap of clothes, drew out some underwear, and a green silk dress.

"Now look, here's some lovely cami-knicks, and a lovely green *crêpe-de-chine* frock! Eh?"

"Green! That's my colour!" cried Pasta Flava.

"Put them on, eh?" said Irene.

"Yes, darling, anything you say." Pasta Flava put on the cami-knickers, and then, embracing Irene, said, in a confidential whisper: "I'll tell you something. I'll tell you a secret. D'you know how I manage to keep my figure? It's because I never let men sleep with me. Only by pure love can a woman remain beautiful! Look at me. All men respect and love me, because I don't give myself to them. That's why women hate and loathe me like poison, because they're jealous of me. I tell you this because I love you, darling. . . . How's Mirliton?"

"I think Mirliton's a horrible man," said Irene.

"Oh, he is, darling, he is."

"He gave me the sack, this morning, after you left."

"What?" screamed Pasta Flava. "*What?*"

"Gave me the sack."

"My poor darling!" said Pasta Flava, with tears in her eyes. "He gave you the sack! Was it on my account?"

"No, I don't think so."

"It was! I know it was! And what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know," said Irene, disconsolately.

"Darling!" cried Pasta Flava, passionately, "Don't worry! I'll look after you. You stood by me in my hour of need, and now I shall repay you. I'll find you a better job. Just stay

close to Pasta Flava, she'll take care of you. My poor child! Come to dinner with me on Thursday, and I'll introduce you to everybody. That's the way you get jobs, darling; by keeping in touch with the right people. Come to dinner on Thursday. I'll give you a job in my theatre."

"Your theatre?"

"Yes, I'm going to open one. I'll tell you all about it later. Mogador's going to finance it."

"Not John Stone Mogador?"

"Certainly. You don't think I'd allow a pauper to finance any of my undertakings, do you?"

"Isn't he awfully rich?"

"Darling, he's a multi-millionaire. He owns the Mogador Match Trust, and Mogador Timber, and Mogador Oil, and everything. Millions of pounds, and God knows how many matches."

"But do you know him well?"

"Darling! He wanted to marry me. He went down on his knees and said: 'Pasta Flava, you are the ballerina of my soul, dancing a wild Tchaban on my heart; let's get married.' But I said 'No thank you, I am married to my Art.'"

"And what did he say to that?"

"He said: 'Very well, darling, I'll drink myself to death.' He'd do anything for me."

"Is he going to finance your theatre?"

"I haven't asked him yet, but he will, he will."

"And you really want me to come to din——"

"Darling, I insist. I'll introduce you to Mogador. Mirliton gave you the sack, did he? Very well. Let Mirliton go to the devil! Pasta Flava is going to look after you. From now on, you are protected under the shadow of Pasta Flava's wings. I'll stand by you. I love you. I love all the world, everybody. And everybody loves me. Let them all come to Pasta Flava, and she'll fold them all under her wings! *What's that?*"

It was a moth. Disturbed, perhaps, by Pasta Flava's wild gestures, it flew out of the wardrobe and fluttered aimlessly

about the mirror. Pasta Flava grabbed at it, and by some miracle of chance caught it. She opened her clenched fist cautiously, and looked at the dead moth lying in her palm in a smear of golden dust.

Her mouth drooped. Her lips quivered. She turned to Irene, holding out her hand, and whimpered:

"Look what I've done."

"That's nothing. It's only a moth. They eat up your clothes."

"It *isn't* nothing! To go and kill it, just for that! It's wicked to kill things. God meant us all to live. What if it *did* eat a little of my clothes? I shouldn't have done it.

"Now shall we try on the hat?" asked Irene.

"Now that's a good idea!" cried Pasta Flava, gaily. "Let's put it on, and give them all a surprise. Unpack it, quick. Now . . ." She turned again to the mirror. With feverish speed, she combed her hair, and slipped on the green dress. "My shoes, darling; my shoes, quick. Oh, do let's put the hat on! I'm dying to show everybody. They all love to see me in a new hat!"

Five minutes later, she led Irene downstairs. At the door of the drawing-room, she paused, and whispered:

"I'm going to introduce you to my family. They're all a little mad, darling, so you must humour them. Yes? Don't forget."

Then she threw open the door, and dragged Irene into the room.

(2)

Beneath the feverish feet of Pasta Flava there lay solid, if polished, ground. She may be likened to a daddy-long-legs on one of her mother's gleaming mahogany sideboards, or to a grasshopper on a piece of her grandmother's silver plate. She came of a respectable commercial family—when I say that her great-grandfather was Timothy Flava, the East India

merchant, little more need be said. The previous two generations of the Flavas had aspired beyond commerce, and were now not unconnected with the nobility. They lived quite elegantly on the fruits of investments. Their money was tied up in solid things—in oils, in cereals, in timber, minerals, and real estate—encircled by the iron-bound ring of the Mogador Group.

Pasta Flava's grandmother was still alive, an archaic lady, thin, grim, creased, seemingly deathless, and as upright as a caryatid. Ninety-seven years of life had not dulled her eye or the edge of her voice—Time seemed, rather, to have made a man of her. She was so dry, flat, and narrow that it was utterly impossible to imagine her as a mother. Her name was Birkumshaw—she was of the Lincolnshire Birkumshaws—and she had brought the coat-of-arms into the family.

Her daughter, Mrs. Flava, might have been a twig that had grown out of her and snapped off through sheer dryness. She was smaller, and more brittle; no less upright, but apparently less immortal. It was conceivable that, in due course, Mrs. Flava might die; but Mrs. Birkumshaw had got as near to death as she ever would. Mrs. Birkumshaw was distant, brainless, immobile, and passionless; a statue with a repertoire of mordant remarks. Mrs. Flava, however, had energy; she moved only in swoops, leaps, and jerks; arose spasmodically, dressed hurriedly, and went about her housekeeping at a *pas de charge*. Statues last for ever, but all bustle must come to an end.

Pasta Flava had only her diminutive stature and her hectic energy to remind one of her mother. With such parentage, she was a freak; the ant had given birth to a midge; the little dry Birkumshaw twig had brought forth a flying zymotic bubble.

This bubble now bounced into the drawing-room, and cried:

“Darling! Look at my new hat!”

“New hat, indeed!” said Mrs. Birkumshaw.

“It looks rather stupid, to me,” said Mrs. Flava. “Rather

like a casserole. My dear, was it necessary to buy such a hat? And why pink?"

"Pink and green don't match," snapped Mrs. Birkumshaw.

"Yes, why green? And why are you dressed for dinner at six o'clock?"

"But darling, it's not pink. It's rose. Why are you so unkind to me? And it's later than six, it's gone quarter past. I'm going out to dinner."

"Very nice!" said Mrs. Birkumshaw, with profound sarcasm, "Ver-y nice!"

"But darling, don't you understand, I've *got* to go out to dinner. On business."

"Business!" said Mrs. Birkumshaw.

"Yes, it's not right. You don't think of staying at home with your mother, ever. It just doesn't enter your head, to stay at home for one evening, does it? You ought to begin to realise, Pasta, that you're not a child any more. You're a grown woman, you're getting on in years. You're the laughing-stock——"

"Mother! Darling! How can you say such dreadful things to me! I'm not a laughing-stock. I'm not! Everybody loves Pasta Flava, don't they, Irene? Oh, let me introduce you. This is Irene; my mother; my grandmother, Mrs. Birkumshaw. I bring a friend to be introduced to you, and that's how you carry on, insulting and abusing me. I haven't done anything to deserve it—I haven't, I haven't!" Pasta Flava began to weep.

"Don't *act*!" said Mrs. Birkumshaw.

"Mother," said Mrs. Flava, "don't let's bring up *that* subject again. The stage. Thank God that's over and done with now."

"In front of my friend, too!" said Pasta Flava.

"Really, Miss, er——"

"Jackson."

"Really, Miss Jackson, I beg your pardon. I didn't notice you for the moment. But sometimes, Pasta——"

"That's right, go on, mock at me, and run me down in front of my friends. But it won't make any difference! They all love Pasta Flava just the same—you do, don't you, Irene?"

"Er——"

"There, you see? They love me just the same, mother!"

"My dear, I wasn't running——"

"Oh yes you were. I don't know why you're so unkind to me, mother! I think you and grandmother must be the only people in the world who don't love me! Irene, let's go!"

"Well . . . I'm pleased to have met——"

"Come *on*!"

Pasta Flava seized Irene's hand, and pulled her out of the room.

Mrs. Birkumshaw snorted.

"The girl's mad!"

"No, really, mother," said Mrs. Flava. "She's a good girl, really; she's got a heart of gold. Only *those* people spoiled her."

"You should never have allowed it. I wouldn't have let *you* associate with common actors and naked dancers. Pah!"

"But how could I help it? She ran away with that dancing man overnight. I didn't know, did I?"

"Rubbish! Of course you could help it. *I* brought *you* up better. Why didn't *you* run off with a dancer?"

"Mother, sometimes you're so unreasonable! Nobody could have had a stricter upbringing than Pasta. She hardly spoke to anybody of the opposite sex until she was sixteen. How can you blame me?"

"Rubbish!"

"Mother, how *can* you be so ridiculous!"

"Fine example you set, the way you speak to your mother. Ridiculous, indeed! The girl's wicked, and you're to blame."

"She's *not* wicked, not really. She may be a little foolish, but not really wicked. And I'm not to blame! I almost kept her under lock and key."

"Rubbish!"

"But mother, how can you——"

"Rub-bish!"

"But mother——"

"*Rubbish!*"

"Oh, you're quite impossible, mother!" cried Mrs. Flava; and left the room.

(3)

Pasta Flava and Irene parted at the corner of the street.

"You see," said Pasta Flava, "you see how they treat me at home. They all hate me there. Not a soul understands me, at home. My own mother derides me, and persecutes me. I have only my faithful friends, who understand me and love me. You understand me, don't you, Irene darling?"

"Of course I do."

"And you won't forget to come on Thursday, will you?"

"Of course I won't forget. Well, good-bye, dear."

"Say 'Good-bye, Pasta Flava darling'—like that."

"Good-bye, Pasta Flava darling."

"That's right! Speak to me as if you'd known me all your life. Good night. God bless you!"

Irene went home. She thought of Pasta Flava and her circle, and visualised vague and glorious prospects. But as she passed the gasworks, she was overcome by the black bulk of the immediate future. She had lost her job. She would have to break the news to her family. She was terrified.

Irene had always been obsessed by the fact that she was expected to bring home pay-envelopes. From the beginning of her capacity to earn wages, Mr. Jackson had impressed this idea upon her; he had hammered it into her anatomy with the heel of a slipper. Mr. Jackson did no work, and Oswald had never been able to find an employer willing to pay him for doing nothing. Alfred earned thirty shillings a week. And now she had lost her job.

Her heart contracted as she climbed the stairs. Her father, mother, and brothers were all at home. She glanced at Alfred,

and found some faint comfort in his presence. Then, with the desperate haste of one who plunges into cold water, she said:

"Something terrible's happened—I've got the sack!"

"You've what?" said Mr. Jackson.

"She's got the sack," said Oswald. "She comes in, as cheerful as if she had a rise, and tells us she's got the sack!"

"What for?" asked Alfred.

"Mirliton was reducing staff, and so I had to go."

"So she says," said Oswald.

"Well, that's a nice thing!" said Mrs. Jackson.

"What are we to do now?" wailed Mr. Jackson.

"Well, it wasn't my fault," said Irene.

"Oh no! Of course it wasn't. Oh *no!*" said Oswald. "Oh no, not *your* fault! Oh no!"

"What d'you mean, repeating things like a parrot? Is it my fault if Mirliton was reducing staff? Why should everybody put the blame on to me?"

"Everybody's reducing staff," said Alfred. "It wouldn't surprise me if I got the sack next."

"You be quiet," said Mr. Jackson. "Oh, you see how it is. One learns from the other. Just because she throws up her job, he wants to, also."

"I didn't throw up my job!"

"I *don't* want to throw up my job!"

"Irene, you be quiet," said Mrs. Jackson. "It's bad enough that things are as they are, without you making them worse."

"But it's not fair!"

"Oh no, of course not," said Oswald.

"You shut up!" cried Irene.

"Now then!" said Mr. Jackson. "You've said enough, Irene. It's not your place to be independent, on top of everything."

"Well, I like that! You needn't accuse *me* of not wanting to work. I've worked harder than anybody," said Irene.

"And I've slaved my fingers to the bone to put food in your mouth!" cried Mrs. Jackson.

"Well, how would you like it if——"

"Oh, oh, why don't they stop it?" cried Mr. Jackson.

"You bad girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Jackson. "You try kneeling down and scrubbing floors all day long!"

"All right! You try rushing about on your feet all day long, and being sweet to all sorts of filthy customers, and getting insulted right and left, and having to keep up an appearance on top of it all! See how you like that! And then to be accused of not wanting to work!"

"Nobody accused you of not wanting to work," said Mrs. Jackson. "Only you shouldn't put on airs——"

"Oh, oh, oh!" shouted Mr. Jackson. "Why don't you stop it! My head! My head! Oh, one of these days, I give you my word of honour as a gentleman, one of these days I'll end it all!" He drummed at his temples with his clenched hands.

"Now see what you've done to your father, you bad girl!" cried Mrs. Jackson. "First one thing, then another. You're trying to kill your father, that's what you're trying to do. You'll be sorry!"

"Oh, leave me alone!" cried Irene, "Leave me *alone*!"

She went downstairs into the shop.

The motherly Edna consoled her:

"Never mind, don't upset yourself, they're not worth it."

"But they blame me for everything!"

"Never mind. Listen, we're going to shut the shop in a little while. I'm going with Paula to the Grotto. You come with us, just to take your mind off things."

"The Grotto? Shall I?"

"Yes, do come. Florrie's coming, too."

"Is she? When will she be here?"

"She ought to be here any minute, now. Poor Florrie!" Edna sighed. "Her parents are so strict."

"Poor Florrie? What about poor me?" demanded Irene, in a gust of self-pity.

"Yes, it's an awful shame," said Edna.

(4)

Florrie Oxborrow, at that moment, was going cautiously downstairs. She hoped to slip out unseen, and so avoid the invariable valedictory argument; but she stumbled at the foot of the stairs, and her mother heard her.

Mrs. Oxborrow was a grey, stooping, uncomfortable-looking woman, not unlike a half-drowned cat. She was appallingly righteous, with unalterable standards of propriety. If Jesus Christ had returned in glory, Mrs. Oxborrow would have made him shave and put on a collar; if the Holy Ghost had come to her in the night, she would have called a policeman. She swept out of the kitchen and grimly barred the passage.

"Going out again, eh?" she said.

"Yes, mother."

"Yes. Where to?"

"Nowhere; just for a walk."

"Nowhere; just for a walk! Is that an honest answer? Now tell me, where are you going?"

"I'm only going for a walk."

"If you're not up to no good, why do you creep out like a thief in the night?"

"Well, you only grumble at me if I say I'm going out."

"Only grumble at you! It's for your own good, but you won't listen. You're stubborn. You're always prowling about alone. You'll come to a bad end, my girl! I don't know who you take after—not me, I'm sure. Where are you going to?"

"I told you, only for a walk."

"Who with?"

"Edna and Paula."

"Those Barker girls. Where to?"

"I don't know; nowhere."

"You don't know; nowhere! What are you hiding from me?"

"Nothing." Florrie approached the door. Mrs. Oxborrow peered into her face, and gave a shrill cry.

"Florrie! What's that you've got on your face?"

"Nothing."

"Florrie, don't lie to me! What have you got on your *face*?"

"Only powder."

"Only powder. Only powder! Wipe it all off, at once!"

"But there's no harm in powder. It's just to take the shine off."

"At once!"

"Oh, please——"

"At *once*!"

Florrie rubbed her face with a handkerchief, and sullenly presented it for inspection.

"And never let me see that again," said Mrs. Oxborrow. "Ah, you can sulk and pull faces, but you'll never convince me that I'm wrong in wanting to know where my daughter goes to at night, and stopping her painting up her face like a Jezebel! And don't dare to come back later than ten o'clock."

A hundred yards from her door, Florrie stopped. She took a little mirror from her bag, and hastily re-powdered her face. Trembling with defiance, she put on lipstick, with thick, nervous strokes. Then she hurried to meet Edna, Paula, and Irene.

They paired off. Irene walked with Edna; Florrie walked with Paula. This arrangement was ideal. Irene laid her bruised sensibilities on the warm cushion of Edna's maternal heart, while Florrie cooled her inflamed passions in Paula's dialectical refrigerator.

THE GROTTTO



"NOW that it's getting warm," said Edna, "it'll be rather stuffy in the Grotto, don't you think?"

"Well, it's nice for a change," said Irene.

"You sort of talk to people," said Florrie.

"It's not the place, and it's not the stuffiness," said Paula, "it's the people. They're what attract me. You get such a variation. So many different types of people, all in one place. I mean, where else could you find men like Barbo, and Schnigger, and Syrett, and Dirty Yelvertoft all together? My dear, that place is an education."

"Yes," said Edna, "some of those people have been all over the place, and done all sorts of things. That old man, Clovis, told me he'd been——"

"My dear, you don't want to believe them. They're almost certainly lying. The atmosphere of these places is conducive to lying. But the *types*! If they taught character-reading at some university, they could pick all the necessary specimens for demonstration purposes out of the Grotto. Look at Yelvertoft, for the perfect charlatan—every charlatan is built up on a foundation of Yelvertoft. Look at Clovis, for the perfect bogus mystery-man. Look at poor little Syrett, for the perfect type of the little man trying to appear big. Look at Schnigger, and young Siggers-Rice, and that funny little man, Gratch. Look at Arrow. They all seem so different from the other men you meet, and yet they're so much the same."

"They're all right just to talk to," said Edna, dubiously, "but I wouldn't say I'd care to mix with them, the same as I mix with other men."

"You think they're all the same?" asked Florrie.

"Fundamentally, yes," said Paula. "Some may be good, and others may be bad, but apart from these little distinctions, they're all pretty much the same. They have different affectations, that's all. When you come to talk to them, you find that they all have the same end in view."

"What end?" asked Irene.

"They all want to make love to you," said Paula.

"Oh, don't be silly; not *all*," said Edna.

"Well, why d'you think they put on so many airs?" asked Paula. "Why do they tell you that they're all sorts of things that they're not? Why do they all go out of their way to make a strong impression on you? Simply because they want you to admire them, and to admire a man is the first step to letting him seduce you."

"But not all of them want you to admire them," protested Edna, "some of them do just the opposite."

"It amounts to the same thing, my dear. If a man tells you how strong he is, he's trying to overcome you. And if a man tells you how weak he is, he's trying to get you to pity him; and once a man knows you pity him, he has a hold on you. Why, some women actually *marry* out of pity!"

"You exaggerate," said Edna, "I think you must have sex on the brain."

"No, my dear; but I know a lot about men," said Paula.

"You only think you do," said Edna. "Why, I know lots of men who are perfectly sincere about themselves."

"I bet you a man won't be sincere about himself, unless he thinks he stands a better chance that way," replied Paula. "Believe me, as soon as a man takes the trouble to tell you about himself, he's after you."

"Do you really think so? Perhaps you're right," said Florie.

The Grotto was a café in that part of London W.1 which so appropriately verges on London W.C.—a low, dim place shaped like a coffin. It was ventilated only by the door. Its walls had been painted brown, a colour calculated to conceal the dirt. The dirt of twenty years had worked itself into the

paint. Countless greasy heads and grimy shoulders had made a dado of murky grey. The upper parts of the walls were gummy with ancient grime. Steam and coffee-vapour condensed at the junctures of walls and ceiling, and rolled down in oily tears. The Grotto was never free from smoke; an electric fan whirled all day and kept the atmosphere in a blue swirl, but could not keep it clear, for it was open all day and all night. Tobacco had been smouldering there for twenty years; enough smoke to darken the sun had left ever-increasing deposits of soot, tobacco-tar, and nicotine. The whole place was heavily somnolent, stunned with tobacco, fuzzy, close, provocative of yawns; shadowy, stagnant, humid, dying of enervation. The air clung to the roof of the mouth.

The Grotto was patronised by a mixed clientele. There were bohemians, who spent the day in adjacent public-houses and withdrew to the Grotto to exchange a last few words; unprintable poets, unpublishable novelists, unexhibitable painters and sculptors, and philosophers whose philosophies were simply too good for words; shadowy men of mystery with no possible means of support, the halt, the lame, and the blind; haggard men pausing in the midst of a thousand unrests; homeless men who dozed for whole nights over two-penny cups of coffee; aged men whose families had deserted them, or forgotten them; lonely men who loved the proximity of human beings; young people who came for the fun of the thing; and a sprinkling of old men who seemed to live there. They filled the place, and talked. From nine in the evening until the small hours of the morning, the sound of their voices went on and on, rumbling and churning, prickling with lip-sounds as with bursting bubbles, a heaving waste of deep-throated sound. It began to diminish after two in the morning. By three, it waned to the fitful chattering of a dozen voices. By four, it was almost silent; and then the morning light brought with it a kind of catalepsy. The place was silent. Only two or three men still lingered, because they had nowhere else to go; dirty, unkempt, shivering in antici-

pation of the cold of the streets, stupefied with weariness and stale air, drooping like dying plants over the dregs of their coffee and the ground-out butts of cigarettes.

Paula took off her coat and sat down. She regarded the people with her large, steady, cobalt-steel eyes. She was full of a wary assurance; soon men would come running, and then she would be amused. She felt complacent; she had arranged herself well. She sat between Florrie and Edna, and was strong in the strength of vivid and advantageous contrast. She rejoiced in Florrie's dark hair and high colour, which laid such violent emphasis on her own blonde pallor. It pleased her that Edna was fair. With Edna at her side, it was impossible for an observer to overlook the difference between the magnificent and the mediocre, in bloneness—the difference between gold and brass, ivory and bone—the difference between Paula and Edna.

Now, as she sat there, full of frigid calculation, Paula glowed with illusory passion, her eyes glittering with ambiguous lights. Her mouth was pursed; avid and pensive. She seemed lost in the anticipation, or recollection, of some poignant pleasure. Even her hair suggested abandon. It was soft and unruly, and tended to fall into a cluster of independent locks, each shaped like an elongated question-mark. Her head appeared to shoot forth petals of living metal in the form of an immense chrysanthemum.

"Barbo!" said Irene, in a hasty whisper.

The door opened with a rush, and closed with a bang. A tall man stood in the entrance, and scanned the tables. Then he saw Paula, and advanced with a swagger.

"Why, Barbo! I'm awfully glad to see you again. How are you?" said Paula.

"Oh, I'm fine, thanks. Are you all right?" said Barbo. He held out a large, powerful hand, and took Paula's fingers in his palm with the wariness of a blacksmith handling a camellia. "Would you mind if I sat down at your table?"

"Good heavens, no! Please, do sit down," said Paula.

Barbo sat.

Tito Barbo was an Italian, a promising middle-weight boxer; but there was nothing about him that suggested either Italy or the Ring. He had yellow hair and blue eyes. His nose was unbroken, his ears were not misshapen, and none of his teeth were missing. The fact that he did not look like a boxer indicates that he must have been an extremely good boxer. In a pugilist, a bashed-in face and a pair of cauliflower ears are sometimes signs of inefficiency. Perhaps Barbo's height had helped to save his face. He was long and spare, with an elegant figure. He had a grave forehead, a thoughtful air, and a thick bulldog jaw. He moved with the assurance of a man who knows what he wants. He was, in fact, in sight of his life's ambition. He had always wanted to be a boxer, and had trained himself with that object in view. Now, he wanted to be middle-weight champion, and found himself in the running for a championship fight. Barbo had, therefore, the calm, serious outlook that goes with self-confidence and heavy responsibility.

He pulled up the legs of his trousers to preserve the crease, and tried to think of something to say.

"And how are things with you?" asked Paula, with profound concern. "Do tell me. Are you training?"

"Yes."

"Is it for something big?"

"Yes, pretty big. I'm meeting Mickey Red Haggerty, the Liverpool boy, in three months' time, and Mossy Kraut in six weeks from now. You see, I got to beat Kraut before I can meet Mickey Red Haggerty."

"And do you think you will?"

"Beat Kraut? Third round."

"And it's an important thing for you?"

"If I don't beat Kraut I don't meet Haggerty, and if I don't meet Haggerty, a fine chance I stand to get at the champion."

"Well, look here—do you think you ought to come into stuffy places like this, when you ought to be training, and going to bed early? I'm worried about you."

"Well . . . it's nice of you to worry about me, Paula."

Honestly, I appreciate it! You don't know! But I never break training, and I only came up to this place . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, I only looked in here thinking you might be around. I been wanting to see you."

"About anything in particular?"

"N-no, I just wanted to have a chat with you."

"Well, Barbo, you know how glad I always am to see you. I was only saying to Florrie, a few minutes ago, 'I wonder if Barbo'll be along.' Isn't that so. Florrie?"

Barbo's face reddened with pleasure.

"Glad to hear it," he said. He met Paula's eye. She gazed at him steadily. He tried, for a moment, to construe the meaning of her glance. Then he blushed, and lowered his eyes. He felt his heart beating. "I say," he said, "why not come for a little walk?"

"Oh, but I've only just arrived!"

"Well . . . look . . . there's an empty table over there. Why not come over and have a cup of coffee with me?"

"I'd love to. Would you excuse me, you girls?"

Paula sat with Barbo at an empty table near the door.

(2)

"I can't pretend to know much about these things," said Paula, "but I always heard that boxers had an awful lot to do with women."

"Oh, not me," said Barbo, "not me. I never cared much for women. I never had no time for them. Tell you quite frankly, most women give me a pain. Besides, you can't be a good boxer and run after women at the same time."

"And don't I give you a pain, too?"

"You! Gosh, no; you're the only woman I ever met who didn't. I . . . like you."

"I'm sure you're only saying that to be polite. I dare say you found that women ran after you a good deal?"

"After me? Well, you know, there's some women that run after anything in trousers . . . as the saying goes."

Ah! thought Paula, *Now we're trying the effect of a little modesty; a little self-abasement!* She said, aloud:

"You know, Barbo, you're awfully nice."

"You're nice, too. I can't think of anybody else half as nice as what you are. Honestly, I'm not kidding, I mean it. I've never had a girl-friend, and never wanted one. Most girls are so soft. Either they try to play you up, and run after you for what they can get out of you; or else they can't talk to you. You can *talk*. You're the sort of girl that could do anything. You're straight, and honest. I can tell when a person's all right. If I thought you were only . . . pretty, it wouldn't be the same. I dare say I always had a kind of . . . ideal, only I didn't know what it looked like, or what way to think of it, till I met you. I can't explain myself very well, but you know what I mean."

"Yes," said Paula softly, with infinite meaning, "*I* know what you mean." Her tone said: "I, also, have an ideal, and that is *you*, Barbo."

"Won't you please have some more coffee?" said Barbo. "Or some cakes, or something? Have some milk!"

"No, thanks awfully. Do go on."

"It's a wonder to me that I can talk like this," said Barbo. "If you was anybody else, I'd be afraid you'd laugh at me. But I'm not shy about talking like this to you. I sort of feel you understand me, even if I can't express myself properly. I never thought I could get to like a girl. Nobody'd believe it."

"Why shouldn't they? I believe it. And I think you express yourself beautifully! You put everything simply and clearly—that's much better than being smart, and witty. Oh, you don't know how *tired* I am of smart, witty people."

"Yes, I dare say you're always mixing up with university fellows, and your own people, and all that sort of thing. I mean, the home life you're used to, and the sort of people you're used to; they're different to me."

"They're different, yes. But that doesn't make them any more lovable."

"I was thinking that, myself. What I mean to say is, a man can go high, even if he hasn't been to college. Myself, I couldn't say I was an educated fellow, or a society fellow, like the people in your class. But I can still go higher than most of them. I'm not bragging, honestly I'm not. I started with nothing. My dad, he was an iceman. I was an iceman too, at fifteen. But all the while, I was training myself. Soon, I'll be middle-weight champion, and then I'll make a lot of money. That's something, isn't it?"

Aha! Give them a little encouragement, and they drop the modesty, and begin to put themselves forward as desirable propositions—"Something! I think it's marvellous. Not one man in a thousand could do it."

"If I thought I was going to be a second-rater, I wouldn't dare to talk to you. I say, would you let me see you home, to-night?"

"I wouldn't dream of it. I shall have to stay with my friends until they go, and they probably won't go until late, and you've got your training to keep, remember."

"Yes, I know, but one late night once in a while wouldn't hurt me."

"Well, when I go, you can come with me as far as the bus; but then you must go straight home to bed. I'm worried about you. You must keep in training, mustn't you?"

"Oh, that's all right. Listen, what do you say we go for a walk to-morrow evening?"

"Not to-morrow."

"The next day?"

"Well . . . all right, meet me at eight, at Marble Arch," said Paula. "And now let's go back and join my sister."

Old Schnigger and Dirty Yelvertoft had taken their places at Edna's table. Barbo and Paula drew up two more chairs.

Schnigger and Yelvertoft were ancient comrades. Yelvertoft was a dabbler in the occult, an exponent of the black arts; a professional astrologer. For half a crown he would

wrest the future from the heavens. He had developed the baleful look of a seer, but as he was cross-eyed it came out sideways, and was lost. There was something zoological about the man. He had the cachinnatory laugh of a startled ewe; the clammy, clinging propensity of a limpet; the eyes of a strabismic cod; and a camel's capacity for liquid refreshment. He knew what was unlucky, and what was not. For five shillings he would provide you with a horoscope drawn so impressively that the triangles alone were worth double the money. He was mysterious. For instance, he claimed that he spent eight hours over every horoscope, and that he earned fifteen pounds a week at it. This alone smacked of black magic, for he must have worked twenty-one days a week in order to do so. At the same time, he modestly declared that if he had had more energy, he might have made a lot more money. In spite of his large income, he frequently asked his acquaintances for a pair of old boots, or trousers; presumably, for all I know, to boil into love-philtres.

And as for Schnigger, he was a Labour Leader who had ripened and rotted in the service of the working classes—he had suffered a great deal in that noble cause. He had given his all. Schnigger had spent forty years in denouncing the idle rich. At the age of twenty, he had suddenly become class-conscious. Somebody told him that there were two classes in society, and he had never quite recovered from the shock of this enlightenment. He had, thereafter, been so busy showing people the corns on his hands that he had never been able to spare any time for work. What Schnigger did not know was not worth knowing. He would argue with anybody, about anything. He was invincible. When he encountered a difficult point, he failed to hear it; and if his opponent persisted with it, Schnigger would say: "I can't talk to *you*. You won't listen and learn. I puts it dahn to yer ignorance." Schnigger loved artistic discussions. He had an unvarying missile—he disposed of such incompetent politicians as Dante, Shakespeare, Phidias, and Rodin, by saying: "All very well, but what is their Social Basis?" When anybody

replied: "What do you mean?" Schnigger would say "Gah!" with concentrated disdain, and turn away.

Yelvertoft was talking to Irene and Edna. Florrie had turned aside to listen to the mellifluent conversation of a young man called Paul.

"Some people," said Yelvertoft, "think they're smart. They laugh at astrology, and call it superstition. But blimey, it's a science! You got to make a study of it. You be surprised, the amount of books you got to read. And then agen, I'm always right."

"Ass all very well," said Schnigger, "but what is its social basis?"

"You can talk about your social basises, Schnigger, they're all right for you. But blimey, why should I be ruled by the finite? Why should I be ruled by the blooming temporal laws of this 'ere earth? Eternity, and the infinite, they rule me."

"Wodger mean by eternity?" asked Schnigger. "Gimme a definition of 'infinite', will yer?"

"Get out of it! Why should I? If you're so smart, you give *me* a definition. Come on!"

"I ast you first!"

"Don't try and change the subject!"

"All right," said Schnigger. "Now in the first place, 'ave you 'ad a Marxian edjication?"

"No I 'ave not."

"There yer are, yer see! Then 'ow could I explain to you?"

"You know," said Paula, in a yearning voice, "sometimes, when I think of it, it occurs to me that I should hate to be a man. I should be terrified! When I think of all the responsibilities you men have to bear! The struggles you have to engage in!"

"We don't mind," said Schnigger, "we're used to sacrificin' ourselves."

"Self-sacrifice is a noble thing," said Paula. "Don't you think so, Irene?"

"Oh yes," said Irene.

"And wot do you git for it?" asked Schnigger. "Nuffink. Look at me. I been advocatin' the cause of the workers for forty years, and wot 'ave I got to show for it? Nuffink." He lowered his voice, directed it at Paula alone, and became confidential: "I only got the satisfaction of knowin' that I give me life to a good cause. It's 'ard. I never whine, but it's 'ard. Times I git broodin' an' miserable, an' I says to meself: 'Wot are yer, any'ow, but a miserable ole man, all alone in the world, wivaht chick or child?' An' then, if it wasn't for me knowledge of literature, blimey, I'd do meself in. Mind you," added Schnigger, very earnestly, "I'm not so old as I look, not by a long chalk. It's the worry an' the sufferin' wot's turned me 'air grey. But in meself, I'm stronger an' younger than many a youngster of twenty. Besides, what do they want youngsters for? Intelleck, an' experience; they're more important than youf."

"I think you're quite right, Mr. Schnigger," said Paula, "and I think it's marvellous how you've gone on and on, with one purpose. And honestly, Mr. Schnigger, you nearly brought tears to my eyes just now, when you spoke about being miserable. I do wish you weren't! I do wish there were something I could do to help!" She said this almost in a whisper. As she spoke, her left foot explored the floor under the table, and encountered Barbo's right. Tentatively, she put on a gentle pressure.

Barbo was intensely aware of this. His heart pounded, but he thought that this contact of feet was accidental. He dared not return the pressure. He felt that an intermittent current of electricity was passing from Paula's foot to his. His throat grew dry.

Very well, thought Paula, withdrawing her foot, now you're trying to be a he-man, are you? Big, strong, silent, indifferent, masculine man. We'll see about that!

The Grotto was full. From time to time, men emerged from the clouds of cigarette-smoke, and came over to Paula's table with complimentary remarks and expressions of adoration.

They shook hands, and tried to linger.

"Isn't it marvellous how many men she knows?" whispered Irene. "How on earth does she manage to know all these people?"

"She encourages them to run after her," replied Edna, "I don't think it's very nice."

Florrie rose with a start, and put on her coat.

"Half-past twelve!" she said, with horror, "and I was supposed to get back by ten!"

"We'll go, too," said Edna, "I've got to get up early."

"Yes, it's getting terribly stuffy here," said Paula, "I'm going, too. Good-night, all! Good-night!"

Barbo patiently followed her out.

Schnigger said to Yelvertoft:

"It's a pleasure to talk to a gal like that. She's got *class*. Did you see what a look she give me?"

"She give me that look, not you," said Dirty Yelvertoft, with belligerence.

Other men talked of her:—

"She's a little devil. Full of passion. She reminds me of a woman I used to know in Odessa."

"Jisses-Kerist, tit you see wodda *smile* she gafe me?"

"What a figure!"

"She's fell for me, did ya notice the way she looked at me, eh? Oh gorluvaduck, eh? Wadda look, eh? I'm gone take her out."

"Say that again, and you'll get a smack on the nose!"

"She's a right cow, she's a warm bit of stuff. Arrow, did you see the . . . the sort of . . . sideways look she gave me?"

"She touched my foot! I've got a mark on my boot, to prove it."

Behind the counter, the proprietor's wife muttered in her husband's ear:

"I don't like thata gal. She's no good. She giva you such a look! Hoo! She look ada men like she wanna bit. She's a tart."

"Nice girl," said the proprietor. "Only young once."

(3)

Barbo, in the first disconsolate stage of love-sickness, left Paula when her bus appeared.

"Silly ass," said Paula, as soon as he was gone.

"Paula, do you think it's right, to lead the poor fellow on like that?" asked Edna.

"Of course it's right. It's good practice. All those people are good practice. A girl can't know too much about men. This Barbo thinks he's a tough proposition, you know. It'll be rather amusing."

"But say he falls madly in love with you?" asked Irene.

"My dear, he will fall madly in love with me. He probably has, already," said Paula.

"But if you're not serious——" began Edna.

"Serious! My dear! Why, even if he becomes middle-weight champion, I don't suppose he'll make as much as five thousand a year. Serious! When I become serious, there'll be something to be serious about."

"But won't he feel horribly cut up about it?"

"Mm, yes, I suppose he will. He'll get over it."

Florrie forestalled Edna's indignant protest with a worried exclamation:

"Oh, hurry up, bus!"

"Poor old Florrie," said Paula.

"Say I kept you," said Edna, "if you like, I'll come round and tell your mother it was my fault."

"No thanks, Edna dear. You're awfully sweet, but it doesn't matter at all." Florrie shrugged her shoulders, and added desperately: "Who cares?"

Nevertheless, she glanced uneasily at every clock, and, as soon as the bus reached Turners Green, ran home as if ten thousand devils were pursuing her.

VI

A COMMITTEE AT LUNCHEON



"MY dearest mother," said Pasta Flava, "let me introduce you to one of my very dearest friends, Mrs. Carrie Glawb."

"Charmed," said Mrs. Flava.

But there was nothing in Mrs. Glawb's appearance to charm so fastidious a lady as Mrs. Flava. Mrs. Glawb was unprepossessing—a peptic mountain, dotted with precious stones. She abused her cosmetics. From the floury pillows of her face there protruded an incongruous little nose, like the beak of a cockatoo. In place of a chin, she had a few slices of fat. Between these slices, there appeared a row of large, yellowish pearls, which might have exuded from her like drops of oil. Between the pearls and the beak there was a smug little mouth. Herr Brunngraber might have said of Mrs. Glawb that, boiled down, she would have been worth about £7 8s. 4d., as margarine at eightpence a pound; that, eviscerated, she would have re-strung about seventy-one tennis-rackets; and that, skinned, she would have yielded hide enough to cover a cabin-trunk and four cigarette cases. I am unable to state how much land her calcined bones might have fertilised—I do not think that she had any bones.

"Yes, dearie," she said to Mrs. Flava, in an easy-going, asthmatic voice, "I used to be as thick as thieves with your girl. I saw her dance at the Pindaric, twelve years ago come next Spring. No, I'm telling lies. Thirteen years ago come May. She was a lad! . . . And this is the old lady, eh? Mrs. Birkumshaw, ain't it? Well, now! To look at you, I would of said that you was the daughter, and Mrs. Flava was your mother. But then again, Mrs. Flava, you might be your own daughter's daughter. What I really meant to say was, you

all look like sisters. Well, now. How you professionals do keep your looks!"

"Prof——" began Mrs. Flava; but Pasta Flava interposed, hastily.

"Mother, Mr. Kasbek."

Kasbek came from South-East Europe, or somewhere near Asia Minor—that is to be assumed on account of his name. His accent might have been anything but German. He made English picturesque by his faintly musical inflexions. His voice was gentle and guttural, soothing to the ear like the sound of a playing fountain. He was tall and massive. His hair was grey, his face and hands were greyish-white, and he dressed in a loose suit of soft grey flannel. In spite of his bulk, he resembled a cloud—flocculent, extensive, and amorphous. When he stood upright he seemed to fill all space, but one felt that if he ran into a cold mirror, he would condense into raindrops. He moved soundlessly on rubber heels. When he sat down, his largeness fell from him like a cloak; his environment seemed to suck him in, leaving only his watchful black eyes and his polished, pallid finger-nails. He billowed and drifted, and made himself inconspicuous as a background—he was always behind you.

He loomed, bowing, over Mrs. Flava.

"Madam, I am very much honoured."

"Charmed," said Mrs. Flava.

"I am also a little uneasy," said Kasbek, "it seems to me that Mademoiselle Flava must have invited me a little too hastily. I feel that I cause you a great deal of inconvenience."

"Not at all," said Mrs. Flava.

"The fact is," Kasbek continued, "your charming daughter called us together to discuss some business in which we have to co-operate. But I dread to think how we must disorganise your household——"

"Well, dearie," said Mrs. Glawb to Mrs. Flava, in a rich wheeze, "we're all bohemians, ain't we? You take us as you find us. That's the way I look at it." She added, as one who fishes for a compliment: "I dessay it's a bit of a comedown for

you, to sit at table with me. Before I run off with Glawb I only danced in the second line at the Gaiety—my hips were a bit on the wide side. But I can see you was in the drama. Not that I didn't always keep in touch, mark you. I always could appreciate the heavy arts. A patron of the boards I always was, and am, so treat me like one of yourselves. You wasn't with Tod Slaughter, was you? I seem to remember you in 'Maria Marten'."

"I have never been connected with the theatre," said Mrs. Flava.

"Now you ain't going to tell me you was in the Circus line? Well, after all, it amounts to the same thing. I mean to say, there's good and bad of all sorts. You remember Maisie, of the Flying Mancinis? The girl what split her tights by accident, in front of King Edward? Well, she got off with a stockbroker, and had her carriage and pair, just like you—Oi! Pasta, what you pinch me for? I bruise as easy as a peach."

"Ahem! Mrs. Glawb, Colonel Bulba," said Pasta Flava, "I don't think you've met before. Darling, you must meet Bulba; an old, tried friend. He nearly won the Russian Revolution."

"Not one of these Bolsheviks?" asked Mrs. Glawb, laying a hand on her pearls.

"I was with Koltchak," said Bulba, stiffly.

"An acrobat, or one of them Russian ballit-dancers?" asked Mrs. Glawb, more amiably.

"Madam, *Admiral* Koltchak," said Bulba.

"Oh, the navy, eh? All the nice girls love a sailor, eh? He-he-he!"

"Madam, allow me to explain. I was a colonel of the Dnieper Cossacks."

"Oh ah, I beg your pardon. I know them. I've heard them several times. Nice voices they got; and little three-cornered banjos. Where you playing now?"

"He was a soldier," said Pasta Flava.

"It seems to me I've seen you somewhere before," said

Mrs. Glawb, "round Bond Street way. Do you get about the West End much?"

"A little," said Bulba, adjusting his frayed tie.

"I'll remember where I saw you, in a minute," said Mrs. Glawb.

"It was probably someone else," said Bulba, reddening.

"Oh, I never forget a face. . . . Wait a minute, it's coming—it's on the tip of my tongue——"

Bulba's hand shook as he lit a cigarette.

"I've got it——"

"Luncheon is served," said the Welsh maid-servant, appearing at that moment.

"Now she's been and put it right out of my head," said Mrs. Glawb, with some irritation.

They all went into the dining-room.

(2)

"It will, of course, be necessary to form a committee," said Kasbek, delicately picking at a sole, "While it is understood that we are all friends, it will also be necessary to bear in mind the fact that business is business. If you will forgive my mentioning it, the running of a theatre must not be left to chance. I put it to you that, while we are together here in a spirit of friendship, we go into some details."

"Darling, don't let's be sordid," protested Pasta Flava. "Don't let's be business-like!"

"No, madam, but——"

"Pasta Flava, not madam."

"There are many things to have clear," continued Kasbek.

"Well, clear them," said Pasta Flava, "and leave the artistic side to me. I'm an artist, and everybody loves me. Even now, I don't look my age, do I? Do I, Kasbek?"

"Madam, you have no age."

"Pasta Flava, not madam. Do I look my age, Bulba?"

"Yes," said Bulba, "but you are none the less charming for that."

"I know you hate me, Bulba. I know you scorn and deride me. Go on, insult me—throw stones! They pass over my head. I know you look upon me as just another dancing-girl. I know I'm old, and hideous, and can't dance any more——"

"God forbid that I should deride you!" cried Bulba.

"——But I'm known, and loved by everybody else!" continued Pasta Flava, "and that is why the Flava Theatre is going to be such a great success."

"The Flava Theatre!" exclaimed Mrs. Flava. "Bless my soul!"

"Yes, mother darling—a little theatre, with a list of members. Don't you see what a huge success it's going to be? We put on works of art that people can't see in other theatres. We put on banned plays, all about sex and life—and we may, because we only show them to our members, and not to the general public. Oh, don't you understand? All my friends will come, because they all love me. The public will scream to be let in, because, darling, the public are wise and beautiful, and love art as much as I do. The whole point is," said Pasta Flava, with portentous gravity, "everybody loves me, and where love is, love and faith, nothing can fail! Look at the crowds we'll get. For six days in the week, we'll interpret works of art that other producers can't appreciate. We're going to open with a masterpiece—*The Case of Heinrich Lobst*, by Hackenschlag-Achweh, all about a waiter and a princess. Bulba's going to be the waiter. I'm going to be the Princess. And it's going to be a success! Because the public loves true art!"

"I am perfectly willing to do anything," said Bulba, "my one desire is to serve Pasta Flava."

"I can act!" cried Dita.

"And me," spluttered Futtercake. "Ahem! Friends-romanscountrymen, er, lemmeyer ears, chrm!"

"I can do my share!" exclaimed Mrs. Glawb, truculently, "I ain't just a common——"

"Per-mit me to offer a suggestion," said Kasbek; and his soft, soothing, sing-song voice seemed to absorb and deaden all other sounds; "we are all admirably suited to the business in hand. First of all to dispose of my insignificant self—I am not inexperienced in the theatrical business. I spent some years of my life in running a company—the Kasbek Repertory Company—in Eastern Europe. I know the business from A to Z. Our esteemed friend Pasta Flava is a great artist, known and beloved by everybody—a universal idol. Pane Petroneli and Mr. Simson are gentlemen of super-normal strength. He who made all things, and set the stars on their allotted orbits in space, might have designed them to be scene-shifters, doormen, and units in crowd-scenes. Colonel Bulba is multi-talented. An old soldier and a member of the Nobility can turn his hand to anything. Mr. Futtercake . . . ah, er, Mr. Futtercake . . . may show signs of some latent histrionic genius. Our charming friend Madame Dita, also. Each of us will do that which comes most natural to him——"

"I shall be able to dance a little!" cried Pasta Flava, with tears in her eyes.

"There is only the financial side to consider," said Kasbek.

"I have a thousand pounds," said Pasta Flava, "and darling, be careful of it. It's all I have in the world."

"We need at least three thousand," sighed Kasbek.

"Oh," said Pasta Flava, quietly, "then in that case, we're finished." Thereupon, she burst into tears.

"What about Mogador?" asked Mrs. Glawb.

"I haven't asked him yet," said Pasta Flava, "why must you nag and persecute me? He loves me. Everybody loves me. Only I haven't asked him yet. Oh, ho . . . ho . . . ho-o."

"What, there is still time to despair!" cried Bulba, stoutly, "You have a thousand pounds. That is a third of the battle, dear lady. Cheer up!"

"A noble thought!" said Kasbek; and began to eye Mrs. Flava so meaningly that she at once shook her head, and said:

"If you were about to ask me for financial support, I refuse

in advance! I disapprove of theatres, especially modern theatres. Besides, every penny I possess is already tied up in sound interests. I would never dream of realising solid shares to finance any crack-brained schemes."

"Oh, there's a nice thing to say!" sobbed Pasta Flava. "Me! Crack-brained! When I've inspired all the great men in the world! I have been the little ballerina of everybody's heart—danc-dancing a wild Tchaban on their souls—ah, oh!—and everybody loves me . . . even if I *can't* dance any more. And then you say I'm crack-brained . . . and hate me . . . and crucify me! Oh, mother! How could you! Mrs. Glawb . . . lend me some money!"

Mrs. Glawb developed a firm spot, in the region of her mouth. She shook her head.

"But don't you see how rich we're all going to be? It's not the money I want—it's the theatre—all the people, all the faces, all the laughter, and the clapping, and the lights—everybody happy, everybody loving me, and laughing with me. I'd——"

"Too bad," assented Mrs. Glawb.

"And this is the woman I befriended!" cried Pasta Flava, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Oi, wodger mean? Pardon *me*, lovey, I ain't beholden to nobody, *if* you don't mind! Wot way have you befriended me in, may I harst?"

"Cherble-lerble-lerble!" exclaimed Futtercake—by which he meant to say, "Charming ladies mustn't quarrel."

"Stay," said Kasbek, waving a great grey hand, "let me make a suggestion to you, madam. If Mr. Mogador invests money in this theatre, will you do likewise?"

"Mogador won't," said Mrs. Glawb.

"But say he does?"

"Cor! Well, if he does, I will! Why, my hubby was connected with Mogador. Lord bless my cotton socks, I've got money invested with Mogador! He's a big man."

"A patron of the arts," said Kasbek.

"Well, so am I!" snapped Mrs. Glawb.

"I solemnly warn you," said Mrs. Flava, to her daughter, "that if you lose your money in this venture you will never get another farthing."

"But mother, how *can* we lose? Has the public ever let me down? Haven't I been applauded in every country in the world? Oh, failure is impossible. Besides, I'm versatile. I'm an actress as well as a dancer. And our theatre's going to seat at least three hundred people! And it's going to be beautiful! And we're going to put on *The Case of Heinrich Lobst*—it's been banned in five continents, mother, just think of that!" Waving a fork triumphantly, she turned to Mrs. Glawb: "If John Stone Mogador lends me a thousand pounds, will you, also?"

"*If* he does," said Mrs. Glawb. "If it's good enough for John Stone Mogador, it's good enough for me, I suppose." She picked up a chicken-leg between a thumb and a jewelled forefinger, and began to gnaw.

"About the legs of chickens there is a kind of fatality," said Bulba, "they slide when attacked with finesse. It is necessary to get to grips with them, and overcome them with the bare hands. I am reminded of an incident in a village called Kutsk, just by Vladivostok, not long before poor Koltchak's last retreat. There was a kind of wall, built of overlapping planks. Some of our men had become a little restive—even mutinous—and it had been necessary to execute one or two against this wall, so that it was peppered with bullet-holes until it resembled a cribbage-board. Now a certain fellow called Avertchenko——"

"Wait a minute!" cried Mrs. Glawb, "Don't say anything! It's coming back to me. Now I've got it!"

"What?" asked Pasta Flava.

"Where I saw him before," said Mrs. Glawb, staring hard at Colonel Bulba. "It's a funny thing, I never, never forget a face. Talking of boards sort of brought it back to me. I may be wrong, but haven't I seen you carrying two sandwich-boards, in Bond Street?"

"Me?" said Bulba, his cheeks scarlet. "Ma'am?"

"Yes, *you*. Now I remember. It *was* you. You were wearing the same suit of clothes, too. You gave me a leaflet, something about permanent waving for two pounds, or something. I thought I was right!"

"Madam!" said Bulba.

He found another cigarette in a waistcoat-pocket; but as he conveyed it to his lips, Mrs. Flava's eye met his in a glance of frigid disapproval. He put away the cigarette, and shrugged his shoulders. "You were dreaming, Mrs. Glawb; or I have a double."

"It *was* you!" cried Mrs. Glawb. "And don't try and make me out to be a fool, neither, *if* you please! I don't see nothink outrageous about it. There's no need to be stuck up, and make yourself out to be what you're not. My father was a working man, on the railways, and I'm proud of it. All the more credit to *me* I say, if I've worked my way up and bettered myself."

"I do not pretend to be what I am not," said Bulba, with dignity.

"Well, it ain't what you *was*, it's what you *are*, that matters," said Mrs. Glawb, complacently looking down at the jewels on her bosom.

"I quite agree," said Bulba.

There was a terrible silence.

Finally, Pasta Flava spoke, with the false casualness of one who wishes to change the subject of conversation.

"Oh, by the way, I promised to give that poor Irene a job. Do you think she could be a barmaid, or a cloak-room attendant, or something? Poor darling, she suffered on my account, and I'd forgotten all about her."

"Find the money first, then talk about giving people jobs," suggested Mrs. Glawb, sucking the bare thigh-bone of her chicken.

"But you'll come in if Mogador does?" asked Pasta Flava.

"*If* Mogador does."

"Strawberries, Colonel Bulba?"

But Bulba was caught in the claws of a dark humiliation;

he was experiencing that sensation of pressure and drag in the throat and the stomach, which can fill a man more effectively than food. He was hard put to it to lift his voice from a heavy monotone of despair, to say:

“No, thank you very much; I think not, Mrs. Flava.”

Then he tried to smile, and almost succeeded.

VII

PAULA AT THE MIRROR



"THAT'S right," said Mrs. Barker, "go out and enjoy yourself. I don't blame you for not thinking of nothing but your own pleasures and amusements. I don't blame you. The less you do, the more you're thought of. Go out, go on, go out. Never mind your poor old mother. She's always here to slave her fingers to the bone for you. Make the most of it while you can, dear, because I'll be gone soon. I can't last much longer."

"Mother, don't be such a fool," said Paula, "what d'you expect me to do? Scrub all the floors? Besides, you're having your friends to tea, and you'll be perfectly happy."

"Well, you might at least tell your mother where you're going of an evening."

"But my dear! I have nothing to conceal. I'm going to a dance with a boy, a perfectly nice, harmless boy. You don't *really* think I'd do anything I ought not to do?"

"Goodness gracious, no! No daughter of mine would get——"

"All right then, be a dear and don't bother, and run along and have your tea with Mrs. Socket. I'm going upstairs to dress."

Mrs. Barker returned, sighing, to her friends in the shop-parlour.

"These girls," she said, "they only think about going out to dances. I don't know, I'm sure. When I was a girl, it was different."

"No good'll come of it," said Mrs. Socket. She was a tall, ominous woman, always full of grim foreboding. "One thing leads to another. Dancing leads to cuddling and larking about, and cuddling and larking about——well, never mind,

never mind; but no good'll come out of it. I always tell my Gladys, but she don't take notice. I knew a girl that caught meningitis in a dance-hall."

"It was Mrs. Munt's poor Hilda, wasn't it?"

"No, Mrs. Fletcher's poor Ivy. Mrs. Munt's poor Hilda had something wrong with her inside. They *said* it was appendicitis." Mrs. Socket nodded significantly.

"They all say that," said Mrs. Clark.

"No, but Mrs. Fletcher's poor Ivy was a sweet girl," said Mrs. Socket. "Oh, ever such a nice girl; to look at, I mean. I would of been ever so fond of her, if it wasn't for her character."

"She was a quiet sort of a girl," said Mrs. Clark.

"Ah, still waters run deep. I dessay there was no harm in her—and perhaps, after all, even if there was, it was the fault of her upbringing—but she'd run a mile after a pair of trousers. Well, God forbid I should sit in judgment. Judge not lest ye be judged. Whatever she done, she was punished," said Mrs. Socket.

"It was about the time my Paula had the 'flu," said Mrs. Barker.

"No, later than that," said Mrs. Socket, "it was just three weeks all but a day after they tapped poor old Martha Meek. D'you remember her dropsy? The time when it took two girls to carry away a tub of water they'd tapped out of her leg? And old Mr. Meek, like a brute, saying 'There won't be no water shortage while my old woman's about'? But my goodness me, she did swell up!"

"They had to get piano-movers to get her coffin downstairs," said Mrs. Barker.

"What causes it?" asked Mrs. Clark.

"The dropsy? Water, that's what causes it," said Mrs. Barker.

"Ah, but it's nothing to what poor old Martha Meek's poor daughter Annie suffered from," said Mrs. Socket, pouring out tea. "Cancer!"

"Where of?" asked Mrs. Barker.

"All over," said Mrs. Socket, "at first, she got it in the tongue, so they cut it off. Then it spread all over. They cut away everything they could, but it was no use. They cut you and cut you, just to experiment. The best thing to do is see a physician, even if you have to pay a little extra. Look at poor Jane Carter—she went into Saint David's for eczema, and they took her arm off. Well, it's what us women must expect."

"I'm a bit worried about myself, too," said Mrs. Clark.

"What is it? Is it the kidneys again?"

"No, it's a sort of pain, just in the side."

"Not a sort of gnawing pain, I hope?" cried Mrs. Socket.

"Yes, a nagging pain. I've had it for years and years."

"It sounds like the liver," said Mrs. Barker.

"Yes, that's what I thought, too. I was frightened to see a doctor, in case they took my breasts off, like they did to poor May Eastern. So I just bore it in silence."

"And how is it now?" asked Mrs. Barker.

"That's what I'm worried about. It's stopped."

Mrs. Socket sighed, and shook her head.

"Neglect," she said. "Poor old Mr. May had a swelling and he neglected it, and look what happened to him!"

"And look at Mrs. Jones's boy, the way he got scalded that time. Blisters like bunches of grapes. It's all neglect."

"That's what comes of having children," said Mrs. Clark, "you kill yourself for them, bringing them into the world, and that's all you get for it. Is it worth it?"

"Sometimes it is," said Mrs. Barker, "look at the Johnson boy. He earns five pounds a week regular and brings home every penny of it. He won't marry, because he's so devoted to his mother. He's in a position to marry, too, and he likes the Morton girl ever so much, but he won't marry because he knows it'd hurt his mother. Now that's what I call a son! And the daughter, too; she did very well for herself—she doesn't have to put her hands in cold water. Some children are worth it. I only hope and pray that my children will turn out to be like that."

"Now your Paula ought to do well," said Mrs. Socket.

"Oh yes, my Paula's a beauty; and such a nice character too. You wouldn't believe. Of course, she's a bit headstrong, now; but thank goodness she's got her mother to guide her. Oh, it's a great thing to have a mother's help and advice! Even when my kiddies settle down, I'll still be with them, to help them with their problems. They'll settle down soon. My poor hubby—" an instantaneous gush of tears moistened Mrs. Barker's cheeks—"always wanted his girls to marry nice people. But it's hard . . . it's hard . . . to lose them after all you go through. . . ." She became incoherent with emotion.

"There you are!" cried Mrs. Socket, "that's all the thanks a mother gets! Settle down! Never a thought for their poor mothers that bore 'em, oh no. They just go their own way, and bolts and bars won't hold 'em. There's ingratitude for you! They ought to go down on their hands and knees, and thank us for bringing them into the world. If only they knew what we've had to go through! Ah well, all a woman does is suffer, suffer, suffer. And what do you get for it? Nothing. Off they go without so much as a kiss-my-foot, the selfish little wretches. Look at the Featherstone girl. After poor Mrs. Featherstone gets milk fever, and white leg, bringing her into the world—she elopes with a common soldier."

"I don't know what girls are coming to," said Mrs. Clark, "all they seem to think of is their pleasure. They're always craving after amusement. And they won't have no children. It's indecent, being married and not having children. All these birth-control clinics, and what not, with their thingu-majigs; it's not *nice*."

"It's just their selfishness," said Mrs. Socket, "and as for those birth-control people, *I* gave *them* what for. They were on at me, before my Freddie was born. I says to the woman, I says: 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself,' I says, 'talking like that to a married woman old enough to be your mother,' I says, 'Allow me to tell you, I've had eight, and buried four, and *I* ought to know what's what,' I says, 'and what's more,'

I says, 'I've lived for forty-five years without your pessimists, or pharisees, or whatever you call 'em,' I says, 'and got over more illnesses than I can remember,' I says. Well, she just turned round and walked away. They can come over these ignorant young girls; but not me, thank you!"

"Birth control. Why, I never even dreamt of such a thing, when I was a girl," said Mrs. Barker.

"The trouble is," said Mrs. Socket, "these young girls think that because there's this birth control they can just go and do as they please."

"No decent girl ever even thinks of such things," said Mrs. Barker. "I never."

"It was never no pleasure to me," said Mrs. Socket. "All *that*."

"Nor me," said Mrs. Clark.

"The thing is, all men are beasts," said Mrs. Socket, "so you be careful of your Paula. She's a pretty girl."

"Oh, my girls wouldn't dream of doing anything that wasn't right," said Mrs. Barker.

"Well, you can't be too careful."

"Oh, they'll be all right. My Paula's upstairs now, dressing herself up to go out. She's a good girl."

"Hm!"

(2)

Paula, having shut out the offending profile of the sulphuric acid works by drawing the curtains, had undressed. She moved slowly. It was one of her characteristics that she never hurried. She dawdled, peeling off her stockings with the infinite care of a taxidermist skinning a rare bird. Then, with her hands on her hips, she stood before her mirror, and gravely regarded herself.

Paula stared her reflection in the face. Her glittering cobalt-steel eyes were narrowed in intense appraisement; she might have been an unimpressible critic before a dubious work of art. She examined her body in sections;

thorax, limbs, and abdomen. Her face cleared. She could find no fault. Her shoulders, slightly broader than the average, were white and flawless. Her breasts were prominent, hard, and globular. Her thighs and haunches lay in firm and perfect curved surfaces. Her hips were narrow—decorative and useless hips—the hips of the woman who is unfitted for motherhood; the hips of the masculine female, the biological dead-end.

She thought, with a quiver of triumph: *Nakedness is a final test. I can stand it. How many other women can say as much? Irene has moles; Florrie is too hairy; Edna sags—but me, I'm perfect!*

She began to study the effects which may be brought about by subtle contractions of the facial muscles.

She covered her mouth with a hand, smiled, and observed how her eyes were unaffected by this expansion of the lips. She withdrew her hand; her face was a smiling mask. She accentuated the ambiguity of her smile by slightly tightening the corners of her lips, and by raising her right eyebrow a tenth of an inch. This was good; this was mysterious. For the fiftieth time, she carefully memorised these little muscular manipulations, and stored them in a mental pigeon-hole labelled *Enigma*.

Then, relaxing the corners of her mouth, she drew in her upper lip, thrust out her lower lip, lowered her eyelids, and looked upwards. This produced a petulant effect. It was an expression which said: *Why are you so slow? Kiss me, fool!* But it was not good enough; a touch of ambiguity was needed. She contracted the right-hand corner of her mouth, slightly depressing the left-hand corner, opened her eyes a hairs-breadth wider; and the expression was perfect—it might have expressed anything; whimsical petulance, mockery, bitterness, hardly-suppressed admiration, or a desire to be kissed.

She paused for a while, to massage her face with cream, carefully palpating the flesh below the cheek-bones. She felt that if she could achieve some reduction of her cheeks, the consequent accentuation of the cheek-bones would facilitate

expressions of profounder ambiguity, higher emotional subtlety, and warmer sexual promise.

Then she practised languor. She let her head fall backwards, almost closed her eyes, and relaxed her mouth until it became a soft red cushion; breathed more heavily; slowly opened her eyes, and gave herself a frankly amorous stare. *I am yours—take me!*—no man on earth could fail to react to that attitude. . . .

Her head came forward with a jerk; her mouth hardened; her eyes opened in a glare of icy anger. *How dare you? How dare you!*

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

She unscrewed the cap of a battered green tube, and applied a depilatory cream to her armpits. During the prescribed ten minutes, while the cream dried, she clasped her hands at the back of her neck, and struck amorous poses; leaned back, inflating her chest; brought her elbows forward, and stood with her legs parted; squatted on her heels, and finally lay on the rug, looking up at the ceiling. Then she rose, washed with a kind of surgical thoroughness; applied discreet drops of scent behind her ears, along the parting of her hair, and at the points of her shoulders.

Before making up her lips, she raised an arm to her mouth, and rehearsed a kiss. It began with a gentle, insistent suction; then her lips spread wider, the suction grew fiercer, and at the end of ten seconds—she counted ten, slowly—she lowered her arm, and laughed.

She put on a dress which clung to her like the skin of a fish; attached to her ears a pair of tiny studs of dark jade; adopted her enigmatic expression, and then went out to meet Barbo.

(3)

She was astonished to see Max Yates waiting for her at the bus-stop. The Great Lover of Turners Green was dressed in

his best suit and a new tie. His face was pale, and there were purple circles under his eyes.

"Oh, Max," said Paula, without enthusiasm, "fancy meeting you."

"I—I hope you didn't mind. I thought I might see you, just for a minute. I been waiting for two hours. I wanted to have . . . a word with you."

"Oh. Well, what is it?"

"Not here, not in the street—look, haven't you got time just to come and have a coffee, or something? It's very important."

"Well, if I'm not longer than ten minutes."

"Paula, why are you so—so cold with me now?"

"But my dear, is there any need to be *ardent*?"

In a neighbouring tea-shop, Max Yates was swept away by his emotion.

"I can't understand you!" he said. "I thought I could understand women, but you're different. Only the other day I thought you liked me a little."

"Did I say so?"

"No, but——"

"Then what right had you to think such a thing?"

"You seemed to be so nice to me! You sort of made me believe you really liked me——"

"But my dear! You're perfectly hopeless! The vanity of you men is simply terrible! Did I ever *say* anything to you, or agree with anything you said to me?"

"No, but your attitude——"

"My *attitude*?"

"Oh, listen, Paula—I'm crazy about you! I've fallen in love with you. You're on my mind all the time. I can't sleep—I can't eat—I can't do any work—I can't do anything. I want you to marry me."

"You want me to *what*?"

"To be my wife."

Paula put on her expression of whimsical petulance.

"I dare say you say that to all the girls you want to make love to," she said.

"Paula! That's not true! I've never said it before in my life, I swear!"

"But I don't love you."

"Oh, you would! Paula, I've got money saved up—I earn good wages——"

"Oh, don't be so silly, Max. You're not in a position to marry *me*——"

"Money isn't everything."

"No, but it's rather important. But I don't love you, anyway. I think you're an awfully nice boy, and all that, but I couldn't possibly dream of marrying you. You can be a brother to me, if you like——no, on second thoughts, perhaps you'd better not see me again. You must forget me. It's awful to think how you must be torturing yourself——"

"You don't care a damn! You don't care if I live or die! You made me believe——"

"Ssh! You're in a public place, now. If you can't control yourself, I'm going. Good-bye."

"Paula!"

He followed her into the street.

"Max, will you please go away?"

"No!" he marched doggedly by her side, followed her on to the bus, and sat down next to her.

"Max, you're making a perfect fool of yourself."

"I want to talk to you. Listen, Paula, please——"

"You'd better go away."

"You're a—a rotten cheat! You made me think you loved me—you made me believe—and then, just at the last minute, you turn me away! Can't you see I'm mad about you?"

"I can see that you're mad."

"Paula——"

"Oh, conductor," cried Paula, "this man's annoying me. Would you mind asking him to change his seat?"

"All right," said Max Yates, and got out of the bus.

(4)

Barbo was waiting at the appointed place. With his dark blue suit, his white linen, and his air of heavy responsibility, he had something of the appearance of an athletic diplomatic attaché.

"I'm twenty-five minutes late," said Paula, "I'm terribly sorry."

"That's nothing," said Barbo. "Lord, you look nice to-night!"

"Oh, I just dressed in a hurry, and put on any old thing. I know you only say that out of politeness."

"I don't. Where would you like to go, this evening? Say the word."

"Oh, anywhere you like. I leave it to you. Say we go and have a cocktail while we decide?"

"A cocktail?" said Barbo.

"Or perhaps you mustn't, on account of your fighting, and all that. But do you think that one little cocktail would hurt you so very much?"

"N-no, no, that's all right."

"But perhaps we'd better not."

"No, that's quite all right. With *you* . . ."

They passed through bronze doors into the cool half-light of the Tabriz American Bar; a blue cube of modern gentility, dumb with carpet.

"Shall we have a Perroquet Etranglé?" asked Paula.

"Yes, sure, anything you like," said Barbo, who knew nothing of cocktails.

He looked down into his glass at the unbroken surface of his cocktail; a pallid greenish-yellow liquid, pungent with the aromatic smell of gin and the remote cough-mixture smell of absinthe. He felt a momentary twinge of conscience. For the first time in his life, he was breaking training.

"Well, good health," he said.

He was looking through the bottom of his glass; the

rim of its foot reflected a twinkling crescent of light.

"We might, perhaps, go and dance, or something, in a little while; but it's so pleasant in here," said Paula.

"Anything you like—anything! You know, you look nice to-night. Another cocktail?"

"Do you think you ought to? Myself, I like them; they take me out of myself——" Paula looked wistful—"I suffer so much because I'm hypersensitive, and a cocktail——"

"Again," said Barbo, to the waiter. "Whatever it is."

He felt light. His head was filled with buoyant, glowing gas. An immense, hypnotic hand was stroking his cheeks. People came and went soundlessly on the furry floor of the American Bar; black-and-white waiters glided dreamily from table to table; a negro in a white jacket oscillated with a cocktail-shaker, like a devil-dancer trying to shake noise out of a silent rattle. The air was pringling velvet, insensitive to sound-vibrations.

Barbo heard himself talking; the last shred of his higher faculties reeled in a wild incredulity. . . .

"... Don't misunderstand—I'm not just an ordinary man, not just an ordinary boxer—I've got it in me to be a champion, a champion of the world; everybody says so—and then I'll be rich and famous. . . . Why shouldn't I fight the best of them, and beat them? Oh, I know I'm not much to look at, but I can do it—I *know* I can do it! Not just for myself alone, because I'd be satisfied with less; but for you, I could do it. I could! I'm Tito Barbo, a tiger—a tiger can kill an elephant, if it's got inspiration. You're inspiration! You've got to be my inspiration! With you, I could pull down all the champions . . . but without inspiration, why, without inspiration, a man can't live—without inspiration a man can't do anything, not even swing a hammer or stitch a coat. . . ."

"Shall we go and dance?" said Paula.

Barbo gazed at her. Her face was inscrutable; it might have expressed anything—whimsical petulance, mockery, bitterness, hardly-suppressed admiration, or a desire to be kissed.

Her hand touched his. Barbo caught his breath. She smiled; her face radiated ineffable sweetness. Then it became a whimsical mask, with a hint of tenderness about the mouth.

And all the while, through the eye-holes of the mask, there gazed her hard, cool, glittering cobalt-steel eyes.

Inspiration, she thought. *He got that word out of some love-song.*

VIII

DOUGLAS AND OSWALD



NOBODY in the world would have suspected Barbo of such feebleness. The case of this unfortunate prizefighter helps to indicate that nobody is immune from amorous infatuation. It is only by sheer luck that some of us escape.

You stand, constantly, on the edge of a volcano—your unfathomed soul—which may erupt at any moment in a blinding explosion of fifty interrelated emotions, and blow you to hell. If you find life dull, you might bear it in mind; it is an amusing thing to contemplate.

There is nothing like love for turning up your unknown quantities. This state may be described as an obsession; physically, as a combination of several vaguely unpleasant sensations in the region of the solar plexus. In the absence of the loved one, you experience an ache, and a sense of desolation. When the object of your passion is present, you are irritated by a feeling of insufficiency; a suppressed yearning to engulf, devour, assimilate, and utterly absorb. In general, the state is predominantly distressing. It is a species of mental unbalance. A man or a woman in love is capable of any idiocy.

Hence, the folly of Barbo; and the folly of Douglas Barker.

Douglas Barker was what his mother described as a perfect gentleman. He would never have dreamed of doing anything detrimental to his dignity. His dignity, I may say, consisted in a prim facial expression, a tightly-rolled umbrella, a correct bowler hat, a Turners Green-Oxford accent, and an exacting manner with bus-conductors. He was also remarkable for a highly respectable laugh which resembled a polite cough—*Erher! Erher! Erher!*—three breathy exclamations; no more,

no less. He had a definite idea of his position. He was respectable.

Our poor little Douglas had, in fact, tried to achieve gentility by a process of elimination, and had practically eliminated himself in the process. He had become neutral, negligible. His employers trusted him as they might have trusted an adding machine, or a cupboard—not because he was outstandingly trustworthy, but because he had no life in him, because dead men tell no tales. To all intents and purposes, Douglas was dead—a man devoid of initiative, whose ambition was to do nothing. If he could have had his way, he would have been a kind of corpse—he would have ridden in rigid stateliness, and men would automatically have raised their hats to him.

His love for Nellie Hay had an extraordinary result. It was as if someone had stuck a pin into a sealed cell of ambition in Douglas's mind. Nellie appeared to him as a goal. He began to comb his brain for some means of attaining her.

Nellie would have made an excellent mate for Douglas Barker. She was a pale typist, inconspicuously good-looking, with an air of gentleness; given to two or three wan emotions—a milky Evangelical piety, a watery reproachfulness, and a queer, adulterated pity. She liked the rôle of the ministering angel. It pleased her to imagine that she could relieve suffering by fluttering about in an agitated manner. If you broke your arm in Nellie's presence, she would do all the screaming, faint out of sympathy, and expect you to be grateful. Nellie's paradise might have consisted in a Philemon's Pitcher of medicine and an immortal consumptive who wanted his forehead stroked for ever. She hated and feared big, hearty men. She liked her men half dead.

She liked Douglas. If only he had had a nasty hacking cough, she might have loved him.

Nellie had said:

"Oh, Mr. Barker, I do think you'd find a soft collar ever so much more comfortable, now that the weather's getting so

warm. It makes me hot to look at you, with that high stiff collar. Now do be a good boy and wear a soft one."

"A *soft* collar?"

"Yes, a nice soft collar. They're so much better *for* you."

"But . . . Would you really like me to wear a soft collar, Miss Hay?"

"I'd love you to wear a nice, white, comfortable soft collar, Mr. Barker."

Douglas started to wear soft collars. He felt, with a qualm of silent suffering, that Nellie would never know what it had meant to him, to wear soft collars. That Douglas could wear a soft collar was almost incredible.

He displayed his collar.

"Do you like that better, Miss Hay?"

"Oh, I think it's awfully nice!"

"It's horribly uncomfortable."

"Oh, but you'll get used to it."

"I'll wear it if you really like it, Miss Hay, but it makes my neck feel as if it hasn't got a collar on at all."

"Oh, poor boy! Never mind, it'll soon be all right, eh?"

"Yes," said Douglas, smiling bravely, "I suppose so. I say, Miss Hay, don't think me . . . too much of a cavalier; but do you think we might lunch together to-day?"

"Well, yes, I think so."

"Oh, good! Oh, good!"

Douglas sharpened a pencil, with trembling hands. The wood was hard; the blade slipped. He uttered a sharp exclamation, and sucked at a forefinger.

"Oh! Oh! What have you *done*?" cried Nellie Hay. "Oh, poor boy! Oh, you've cut yourself! Oh, what a nasty cut! Oh, you poor dear! Oh, you must put some iodine on it at once—you might get some dirt in it. Where's some iodine! Quick! Oh, how nasty! Poor boy."

"It's nothing," said Douglas, licking a drop of blood from a cut near the nail.

"You must be awfully brave, to stand there as if nothing's happened, Mr. Barker. Put some iodine on."

"No, no, that's all right."

"But you *must*."

"Very well."

Half an hour later, Douglas furtively sucked at the little cut to make it bleed. With great difficulty he extracted two or three drops of blood. Then he handed some papers to Nellie Hay, ostentatiously displaying the wound.

"It's wonderful how you bear it," said Nellie.

By midday, the cut had almost healed. Douglas squeezed it, sucked it, and pressed it against his desk, but it would bleed no more.

At lunch-time, he said to Nellie, with a grimace of agony:

"I'm afraid it's going to fester."

"Oh, you poor, poor, *poor* boy!"

Douglas trembled. He felt that his heart was bursting.

"It's sort of throbbing. Shall we go to lunch now?"

They went to a tea-shop.

"I'm a vegetarian," said Nellie, "it's so much better. It's terrible to think of the sufferings of the poor animals. Honestly, it puts me off meat. The way they kill those poor, poor sheep! I do wish you'd be a vegetarian, too."

"What would you like?"

"Poached egg on mashed potatoes, please."

"Poached egg on mashed twice," said Douglas to the waitress. He stared with unconcealable adoration at the pale face of Nellie Hay. A thousand compliments seethed in his mind. Finally, he managed to say:

"Terrible goings-on in Germany."

"That man," said Nellie.

"They ought to shoot him," said Douglas; but hastily recollecting Nellie's tenderness to slaughtered sheep, added—"I mean, lock him up."

"I think shooting's too good for him; they ought to cut him into little pieces while he's still alive," said Nellie. "How does your finger feel, now?"

"It throbs."

"Then you must eat your egg with a spoon, with your left hand."

"No, no."

"Now don't be obstinate, Mr. Barker; do as I tell you."

"I will, if you call me Douglas."

"Very well; *Douglas*."

With a happy sigh, Douglas picked up a teaspoon.

(2)

Small wonder, therefore, that Douglas felt greatness stirring in his breast. When he reached home that evening, he was moved by a desire to talk to somebody, as man to man. Oswald Jackson was lounging in the doorway. Douglas spoke to him.

"Oh, hello, Oswald."

"Hello."

"How do you find things, these days?"

"The trouble is," said Oswald, "there's no money about."

"Yes, things are bad everywhere. I say, would you care to come out somewhere, and have a cup of coffee?"

"I shall be delighted."

They walked to the Turners Green Corner House. On the way, Oswald expanded.

"You know what, Douglas? There's still plenty of opportunities for men of culture and intelligence like ourselves to make money. Plenty of opportunities. Some people think that everything's played out. Well, they're wrong. There's sort of new things, with plenty of scope. I always did have a kind of talent for business, and I've been thinking things out. I get some good, original ideas. Sound business ideas, you know."

"Really?"

"Yes, it's a fact. You know what? If I only had a bit of capital, I could make millions of pounds."

"No!"

"I tell you yes. My dear boy, a couple of fellows like us could do all sorts of things together. I wouldn't have anything to do with a common man; but a nice, cultured, gentlemanly fellow like you——"

"Oh——"

"No, shut up a minute; a nice fellow like you, and a man like me, we could make money. I get all the ideas. I got organising ability. You know all the details—book-keeping, clerking, and all that. We could start something."

"What?"

"Swear you won't tell?"

"Of course."

"I'm in on some secrets. I'll tell you when we're having our coffee."

Oswald made a gesture indicative of absolute secrecy. He struck a pose of omniscience.

(3)

Although Oswald Jackson tried to convey an impression that he was a man of magnetic personality, he was unable to look anybody in the eyes. For this reason he carried a newspaper, and when he felt his gaze wavering, would unfold it, and point out something with sudden vehemence. His conceit was measureless. His habit of looking into mirrors had assumed the proportions of a psychological derangement. He found pleasure in looking at himself in mirrors; much as normal men find pleasure in looking at pretty women. During his daily walks, remembering the shop-windows in which there were mirrors, he would often walk a hundred yards out of his way in order to see himself at full length. Oswald would furtively glance at himself in the polished backs of cigarette-tins, the glass tops of tables, and even in the unbroken surfaces of cups of coffee.

He chose his friends from among the shabbiest, the youngest, and the simplest of the Soho idlers. Thus, in com-

parison with them, he appeared to be well-dressed, mature, and full of wisdom. He played dominoes with them. If he lost twopence, he grew sullen. If he won sixpence, he would stop playing, and go away, "on business", as he always said, glancing at the clock.

He considered himself primarily as a business-man.

Once, at the age of eighteen, he had written an epitaph, *On the Death of a Mother*, which read as follows:

"It was a sudden stroke,
And heavily it fell;
And my poor heart it broke;
Dear mother, fare thee well."

Thereafter, he spoke of poets as of children. "I grew out of that years ago," he said, when somebody referred to Shelley.

Now, he followed Douglas into the Turners Green Corner House; sat near an electric fan; grinned at himself in a mirror on the left; adjusted his tie at a mirror on the right; acknowledged his smile in the gleaming concavity of a tablespoon; observed, with gratification, the colourlessness of his blanched left hand against his knee; placed his right hand on his moustache, as if to assure himself that it was still there, and said:

"And now, my dear fellow, I'll let you into a few trade secrets."

"Yes?"

"All one needs is a little capital. There's millions to be made. For instance—now this is confidential, mind?"

"Yes, yes."

"Cider. A drink. New beverage, just like cider. Nobody can tell the difference. This is the recipe: Take a gallon of water; add one teaspoonful of yeast, some brown sugar, and an ounce of tartaric acid. Allow to stand for twenty-four hours, and bottle. It's all profit! Now say you gave that mixture a fancy name, like 'Ciderite', and sold it at sixpence for a pint bottle—just think! Water costs nothing. Yeast

costs nothing. Tartaric acid and sugar cost hardly anything. It's all profit! There's money in it. What do you think of that one?"

"Not bad."

"Everybody'd buy it. There's scope for a new drink."

"Yes, it's quite a good idea."

"Or again—hair cream. The idea is, we call it 'Fixolene', or 'Stickum'. You get some gum tragacanth, and just mix it with water; that's all there is to it. Water costs nothing, and gum tragacanth costs practically nothing; and it'd sell at one-and-three a bottle easy. It might be necessary to colour it blue perhaps."

"Blue. Ah . . ."

"And listen, you know what fortunes are made out of medicines?"

"Yes."

"Well, mouth-wash. What d'you think of a mouth-wash? All you do is, mix up a little carbolic acid with water, and colour it with permanganate of potash crystals. It's all profit, and you could sell it at two shillings for a big bottle. You could call it: 'Germite', or 'Bacteriolene'. Mix it up with grease and you've got 'Bacteriolene Ointment', two shillings a pot."

"Very good!"

"Or listen to this one—'Jackson's Fruit Salts'. Just plain magnesia, in a fancy box; two shillings a box. It's all profit. Or listen! 'Doctor Douglas Barker's Health Salts'—mix up a little Epsom Salts with a little Glauber's Salts, and sell it at a shilling an ounce, in a fancy pot."

"Not at all bad."

"And how about this one—'Mother Jackson's Tea'; just ordinary senna-pods, mixed with water, with some sugar put in. Isn't that a good 'un? Everybody'd buy it. It's all profit. Eh?"

"Very good indeed. You certainly do have some original ideas, Oswald."

"Oh, but that's nothing—there's one idea I've got, and it's

great. It's a masterpiece! Promise you won't tell anybody?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Well, listen. You know that the beggars in the streets make tons of money?"

"I've heard they do."

"Oh, they do. Some of them make as much as ten pounds a week. Well, listen. We start an organisation. We employ men."

"What for?"

"We give each man a salary of twenty-five shillings a week, and send him out with various things. One man has a barrel-organ; another man has a lot of pictures to display on the pavement; another man does conjuring-tricks. We pay each man a standing wage, you see? And we take all the money he collects. He has to collect it in locked boxes. We take the boxes. We have a number of superintendents going around, and seeing that there's no funny business. We have men in every part of London—violinists, pianists, organ-grinders, singers, pavement-artists. See? We bring an organising brain to bear on all this, and make a mint of money out of it. What d'you think of that one?"

"That seems a very good idea, to me."

"Oh, I get thousands of good ideas. All I need is a little capital. If you can find a little capital, you could come in with me."

"Unfortunately, I've got no money at all. I'd very much like to put some money into a progressive business, if I had it. But I haven't. And I really would so much like to make some money, now!" said Douglas, wistfully, thinking of Nellie.

"Couldn't you borrow some?"

"From whom?"

"I don't know."

Douglas, humbled by the brilliance of Oswald's genius, felt an urge to assert himself.

"Thousands pass through my hands," he said.

"Go on?"

"Yes, thousands. Do you know, Oswald, they trust me so

much that sometimes, when it comes to drawing out money on Saturday mornings, they just sign a cheque, and let me fill it up and draw the money!"

"Coo!"

"Sometimes as much as five hundred pounds. One week, I drew out eight hundred."

"Cord, if I had eight hundred pounds, I could be a millionaire in a year!" said Oswald.

"Ah . . . well. . . ."

"Hey, look who's over there!" said Oswald, "Look, the Oxborrow girl. Florrie."

"So it is. Who's the man she's with?"

"Don't know. Looks like a Dago."

"Hm. I don't like that girl. I don't think she's respectable," said Douglas.

"Ah, if only I had money, I'd have the finest women in London running after me," said Oswald.

Douglas became pensive, and did not reply.

Three yards away, Florrie Oxborrow leaned across her table, to talk to her companion.

Her eyes were brilliant, and her gestures full of animation; but about her face there was something which suggested that she had recently been weeping.

IX

FLORRIE



FLORRIE OXBORROW had indeed been crying. She had quarrelled with her father.

Mr. Oxborrow was a fat, serious man, with a ragged moustache and prominent eyes. He never smiled. Like others of his kidney, he was meek, but there was a rat-like tyranny in his meekness. He was humble, but his humility was ferocious.

On this particular evening, as he ate his evening meal, he complained to his wife.

"It's a sin and a shame. Our Florrie is going too far. Other girls of her age are only happy and proud to do good. Webster's girl's only too happy and proud to take the juniors in Sunday School—only too happy and proud to do it! And now she's engaged to the Reverend Burt. Oh, I've wrestled with our Florrie, I've pleaded with her, I've gone down on my knees—yes, gone down on my knees before her. Night after night I've gone into her room, and gone down on my knees, and wrestled with the Evil One in her. But she's obdurate. She's stubborn. There's an evil spirit in the girl. Some bad blood."

"No bad blood on my side, I can assure you," said Mrs. Oxborrow, with asperity, "You're her father. If you can't master her, who can?"

"Hm. Where is she now?"

"In her room."

"Doing what?"

"Dressing."

"What for?"

"To go out."

"Who with?"

"The Barker girls."

"The Barker girls! Mary, you ought to have stopped her."

"Could I tie her up with ropes? Did you want me to take and bind her up with links of iron? Be reasonable, man!"

"She'll come to no good!"

"Wonder you don't put the blame on to me for that! Here she comes, now; you talk to her."

Florrie came into the kitchen. She was dressed to go out. At the sight of her, Mr. Oxborrow uttered a loud cry.

"Florrie! What have you got on your face?"

"Nothing," said Florrie.

"Oh Florrie!" said Mr. Oxborrow. "After all I've done for you, and the way I've prayed for you, to go and lie to my face!"

"Why, what d'you mean?"

"Florrie, you know you've got powder and paint on your face."

"No paint, father; only a little powder, just to take the shine off."

"You see!" said Mrs. Oxborrow.

"Hm!" said Mr. Oxborrow.

"Then what do you call *this*!" cried Mrs. Oxborrow, suddenly taking a sixpenny lipstick from the pocket of her apron, and thrusting it under Florrie's nose. "I got this out of your bag."

"I suppose you call that honest!" exclaimed Florrie, "going over my bag, the minute I turn my back!"

"Silence!" shouted Mr. Oxborrow. "Not another word, you painted Jezebel! Wash your face this minute!"

"Yes, wash your painted face!"

"But there's only *powder* on it! There's no harm in powder! Everybody uses——"

"Wash—your—face—at—once!"

"I won't!" cried Florrie, beginning to weep, "I won't!"

"Wash your face at once, or I'll wash it for you!"

"I won't!"

"You will!" Oxborrow rose; his face was inflamed, and his

prominent eyes injected. He pounded the table with his immense red hands.

"I won't wash my face!"

"This very minute, Jezebel!"

Florrie darted to the door, and had half opened it, when her father caught her wrists.

"Wash!"

"No!"

Florrie struggled, but her father dragged her back into the room. Once he held her arms, effectual resistance was impossible. She might have struggled with a feather bed. His huge soft bulk overwhelmed her. The table went over with a jangle and a smash. A plate of beef bowled, wobbling, into the fireplace. Florrie screamed. Mrs. Oxborrow gasped with excitement. Florrie's struggles goaded Oxborrow to a fiercer fury. His fingers dug into her neck. In another moment, he had forced her head to the sink, snatched up a grey rag, slimy from a hundred greasy plates; and rubbed it over Florrie's face with all his might. Then he released her.

Florrie reeled back, sobbing and gasping. Her face was grotesquely smeared. A grey trickle of dish-water ran down her neck into her bosom. She leaned against the wall, speechless, covering her face with her hands.

"You see?" cried Oxborrow in triumph, pointing to a red mark on the dish-cloth. "Paint!"

"Blood!" cried Florrie, uncovering her face. Her nose was bleeding. "There wasn't any paint! It was a lie! A lie! A lie!"

"You see how God punishes you for being wicked?" said Oxborrow, complacently, "Oh, I know you think you can be wicked and escape God——"

"I hate you! And I hate God!" screamed Florrie.

"*What?*" screamed Mrs. Oxborrow.

"I hate you! I hate you! And I hate God—*Oh!*"

Mrs. Oxborrow slapped her face.

"I'm going away, and I'm never coming back any more!" sobbed Florrie, "never!"

She fled to her room, and threw some of her clothes into a valise. Then she left the house, slamming the door.

(2)

When Florrie arrived, Paula seemed to be in a strange mood of exaltation. Her eye, trained in observation, rested on the woebegone twist of Florrie's smile.

"Who's been upsetting you?" she asked.

"Oh . . . nobody."

"You've been crying."

"No. It's nothing."

"Oh, don't be a silly! The old man's been upsetting you again, I suppose."

"Paula," said Florrie, suddenly, "I've left home."

"Well I'm blown! Congratulations, my dear! That's the stuff to give 'em! Walk out, and have done with it! Why stay, and quarrel, and get thoroughly miserable? Well done! . . . But how are you going to live?"

"Oh, I'll have enough to live on. I get two pounds a week at Waverley's."

"That's not much."

"Oh, I'll manage. Lots of girls manage on less. I can get a room for fifteen shillings, and live on the rest. Easy."

"Get a room for fifteen shillings! Live on twenty-five shillings! Good God! How many times must I tell you that that sort of thing's a back-number? I mean to say, two pounds a week! There's no need for a girl like you to live on such a ridiculous sum."

"Well, it's all very well for you to talk, Paula. Talk is cheap. But you're not contented here, are you? Yet you don't do anything about it."

"Listen to me, my dear. It suits my convenience to stay here for a little while. You can bet your life that if I were miserable here, I wouldn't stay for a moment. I'm waiting. I'm after big game. All or nothing is my motto. I don't mind waiting a bit, because I know that in the end things will turn

out exactly as I want them. You see, Florrie, I can keep my family well in hand; but you couldn't. If I'd been in your boots, I would have broken away ages ago."

"And lived on two pounds a week?"

"Good God no! I'd make other people pay, my dear."

"But Paula, seriously, is it nice, all that sort of thing?"

"All what sort of thing?"

"Going with men just for what you can get out of them—sort of selling yourself."

"My dear, you *are* a fool! Who said anything about selling yourself? Do you take me for a prostitute, or something? If you know how to handle men, you can get all you want out of them without giving anything in return."

"But is that fair?"

"Between men and women, my dear, there is only war. Anything's fair in war. Tell me, do you think that men intend to do right by you? Or are they only after you for what they can get? Do you think men like you for your beautiful character? Of course not. Fight them back with their own weapons. Now that French boy, for instance, who's so keen on you——"

"You mean Louis Paul?"

"Tall, dark fellow."

"Um, yes, Louis. D'you think he's keen on me?"

"Of course he is, he can hardly keep his hands off you."

"He's rather nice, don't you think?"

"Um, well . . . nice . . . But anything does to practise on. Anyway, there really is no point in making yourself a slave to any man who wants to get you. All you have to do is, lead him up the garden a little, and keep a cool head."

"You think it would be a good idea?"

"Why not? You know, Florrie, you've got sex-appeal. You could go a long way with men. Why don't you?"

"Have I really got sex-appeal?"

"Yes. You're good-looking, and you're well developed in the right places; and what is more you look as if you'd . . . enjoy being made love to."

"I'm afraid I would," said Florrie, blushing.

"Well," said Paula, easily, "you only have to control yourself. You only have to remember that once a man's got you, he doesn't want you any more. It's the easiest thing in the world, to make a man fall in love with you. You know how to get a man all worked up, don't you?"

"Well . . . well . . ."

"You know how to kiss properly?"

"Yes, oh yes!"

"You know how to sort of give way slowly—how to put up a sort of reluctant resistance?"

"Ye-es," said Florrie, doubtfully.

"The whole idea is, to keep up an *appearance* of passion—breathe heavily—you get my idea?"

"Yes, I understand what you mean."

"Well, in due course, the man will try to maul you about."

"Yes, I know."

"Well, it's just *then* that you've got to pull him up, without putting him off altogether. It mustn't go any further than a kiss. Be as passionate as you like—but *nothing more than a kiss*. Then you indicate that in due course you'll give way to his advances. In other words, you make promises. Then *he* starts to promise."

"Um?"

"Well, you make him fulfil his promise before you fulfil yours. Men are hopeful creatures."

"And when he does?"

"Well, good for you. You tell him that you didn't mean that sort of thing, that you're not that kind of a girl; and you find means of getting rid of him. It's ridiculously easy!"

Florrie gave voice to a scruple:

"It's not *honest*, though."

"My dear, all this stuff about honesty, and straightforwardness, simply doesn't work nowadays. Is anybody honest? Are business men honest? Are lawyers honest? Everything we do is full of false pretences. For instance, why do you put

on lipstick and powder? Isn't it just to make yourself look like something that you're not? And then, look at the way men talk to us—look how they're always pretending to be stronger than they are, or weaker than they are. Is that honest? Or aren't they always trying to trap us? I tell you, Florrie, all this honour nonsense is relative, you understand; relative——” Paula twiddled her fingers; all that Einstein ever thought seemed to be conveyed in the gesture—“What's honest in England is dishonest in China; and vice versa. Take it from me——” Paula's eyes narrowed; her voice became metallic—“the world is run *by* men, *for* men. It's a racket. We women are the victims. I can tell you again; between men and women, there's nothing but plain war. If you love men, they laugh at you. But if you learn how to tread on their necks, you can climb as high as you like. Almost any attractive woman with common sense can go high, if she likes. Other women are your enemies, too, where men are concerned. Women are horrible, too. What you have, they want. But if you're clever, you can use yourself like a weapon!” Paula's voice quivered. “You can turn yourself into a hook for turning men's pockets inside out. You ought to study every attitude, every curve, every eyelash, every tint, and every smell of yourself in order to make men go raving mad after you. Don't be ashamed. It's easy to get them that way. I've done it, time and time again, just for the fun of it. And I know so much about men that there's not a man on earth whom I couldn't get! Let me once find the man I'm looking for, and nobody could get him away from me! I tell you, when I give myself to a man, he'll pay and pay and *pay*! And there's no reason why you shouldn't do likewise.” Paula's hand shot out, and touched Florrie's body. “Be a weapon! That's a weapon, and that, and *that*!” Florrie blushed darkly. “In that one part of you alone, you've got more power than dynamite; only you've got to understand—it's only powerful provided you never use it.” Something terrible seemed to surge up in Paula—some hissing outburst of pent-up energy. She clutched at Florrie's shoulders, put her mouth close to

Florrie's cheek, and said, in a deep whisper: "D'you understand me? Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Paula released her, stood back, scrutinised her, and said, with a laugh:

"This was between ourselves, of course."

"As if I'd say a word!" cried Florrie. She added, tentatively: "I said I'd meet Louis to-night."

"Well?"

"Shall I?"

"Of course. Only try and remember what I told you."

"You don't think I'd lose my head, Paula, do you?"

"Of course not," said Paula. She lit a cigarette. A half-smile on her lips seemed to indicate that she was laughing to herself.

(3)

Hence, loaded to the muzzle with theory, Florrie went to meet Louis Paul. They went to the Turners Green Corner House—a large, decorative abode of suburban distinction, patronised by the élite of the neighbourhood. Such sumptuous surroundings filled Florrie with a sense of dowdiness; but Louis Paul was not unaccustomed to magnificence. He was no ordinary man, for he had been a waiter at the Hotel Paramount, and was tall, slim, and elegant; very dark, with gleaming teeth, romantic side-whiskers à la Valentino, an adorable moustache à la Menjou, liquid eyes à la John Gilbert, and an air of supreme melancholy.

Above all, he had a foreign accent.

To the man who starts from the bottom, a foreign accent is an asset. It may cover a multitude of deficiencies. English-speaking women find something fascinating and adorable in strange inflections. Take away Maurice Chevalier's Parisian twang, and bang goes his charm; make the Garbo talk Mayfair, and she is nothing but a Nordic laryngitis.

Accents create local colour. Bubbu of the Menilmontant gutters may pass as Le Baron Belleville in Golders Green, if, instead of "Shurru!" he says: "*Ta gueule!*"

It was, therefore, hardly necessary for Louis Paul to exert himself in order to be impressive.

"Mademoiselle, you are sharming," he said to Florrie.

"You say that to all the girls you meet," said Florrie.

"Eef you teenk zat, eet ees not true. Always—'ow you say eet—*je m'en fiche des mômes*—women zey do not attract me. But you are sharming. I tell you—*raide comme balle*—frankly, I lof you! *Sans blague*, without zhoking, I cannot think of anythink but you——"

Now we must be careful, thought Florrie; nevertheless, she felt her heart beating. She decided that Louis had beautiful eyes. She remembered Paula's advice. The thing to do was to keep him on the run—get him worked up.

"Do you really mean it?" she asked.

"I do! I swear, on ze 'ead of my mother!"

"Really?"

Louis Paul crossed himself, and stared at her with his large, liquid eyes.

Florrie felt a sudden surge of affection.

"Nice boy," she said.

"I want to talk to you. I want to be wiz you alone, just for a leetle wharle. All day I teenk of you. Now I see you, and I am 'appy. All zese people, zey worry me. I want to see only you before me. You are sharming, and I lof you. Let us go away from zis place."

"Where to?"

Louis grasped her hand; Florrie trembled. In her mind, all that Paula had told her bobbed and twirled and gradually diminished, like a piece of ice on a tide of hot water.

Aha! said Louis Paul, to himself, with an inward smirk, *Ça va!*—"Anywhere zat we can be togezzair alone. Ze open air? Indoors?"

"The open air," said Florrie, with a last flicker of caution.

"As you wish."

They went out.

"There's two people I know over there," said Florrie, noticing Oswald and Douglas.

"Zey do not mattair. In all zis world, zere are only two—you, and me."

"Yes," said Florrie, with a sigh.

They reached the street.

Fate, at that moment, sent a spatter of rain.

"Let us go to my rooms. Zere, it is dry," said Louis Paul.

"No, I don't think I'd better——"

"Why?"

"Couldn't we go to the pictures, or somewhere, instead?"

"Peectures! You do not trost me?"

"Yes, but——"

"Come."

Florrie hesitated. She tried to think of something to say, but her mind was a blur. Doubt and desire whirled together in a red struggle.

"We well zhosit, and talk, and I weel make coffee. Hein?"

"Well . . . well . . ."

"Taxi! Taxi!" shouted Louis Paul.

"But——"

"Seven, Remington Street, Bloomsbury!"

"Yessir."

"But Louis——"

Slam!

They were alone in the leathery darkness of the taxi, and the streets sucked back behind them in parallel dotted lines of yellow light.

"I lof you!" whispered Louis Paul.

His head moved. The light of a shop-window flashed across his face; his eyes gleamed, for an instant, like lamps.

His arm encircled Florrie's waist. She became limp. Their lips met in a devastating kiss. The last vestiges of sanity melted.

"I love you too, Louis! I do! Oh, I do!"

All women are identical, said Louis Paul to himself, with a bored sigh, *kif-kif bourricot!*

"Why are you sighing?" asked Florrie, tenderly.

"Because I lof you."

The taxi stopped.

They went upstairs.

(4)

Later, Florrie came down, alone.

Her face was pale. In her eyes there was weariness, and terror.

She walked aimlessly down the street, still carrying her valise; paused on a corner, and stood by a lamp-post, glancing wearily from side to side. She did not know where to go. She opened her bag, and counted her money; she had exactly seven shillings.

Something sank inside her. She felt, in the region of her heart, a sensation as of freezing water—the physical part of the agony of despair. Then Florrie wanted to lie down in the gutter and die.

Suddenly, she became aware of something gently touching her foot.

Without interest, she looked down, and saw a dog sniffing at her shoe. She sat down on her valise. The dog put its paws on her knees, and licked her cheek with a thin, warm tongue.

Something in the friendliness of this gesture conveyed to Florrie a sudden and complete realisation of her loneliness and her misery.

She put a hand to her face, and wept with the bitterness of a Hagar in the wilderness.

X

THE NAMELESS DOG



THIS dog was homeless, and nameless except for certain well-deserved abusive appellations. He was a notorious dog, who should have been put to death long before.

Externally, he was unsightly. His pedigree might have included specimens of most of the quadrupeds on the face of the earth. He resembled a jackal; but there was that about him which reminded one of a hyena. He seemed to have something of the spaniel about his ears, and a coat which might—or might not—have belonged to a questionable Airedale. He looked as if he had been coated with glue, and rolled in a heap of miscellaneous dog-hair clippings. In general, his colour was unpleasantly yellow. He had only one eye. His back was broad, and his neck was thick; he had short legs, a pink-and-black nose, the jaws of a beast of prey, and a shamefaced air. If he had possessed a tail, he would probably have carried it between his legs; but he had no tail—only a kind of elongated knob, too insignificant even to wag.

He had all the cunning and the vitality of the hybrid. If a cat has nine lives, he must have had about thirty-six. He had an extraordinary faculty for avoiding punishment. He seemed to have a guiding star, a lucky destiny. For instance, any other dog of his appearance would almost certainly have been drowned at birth. Any other dog with a character half as reprehensible would have been marched into a lethal chamber, at least, in later life. But this dog got away with everything.

His appetites were colossal—he devoured everything: boots, books, the contents of dust-bins, bones, bread, and whatever he could steal from butchers' shops. He was as lecherous as a

monkey. No bitch could resist him—he had that sex-appeal which goes with fantastic ugliness. He was not even amiable; he lacked the proverbial canine qualities. Other dogs are supposed to starve themselves to death on their masters' graves: this dog would probably have dug up his master and eaten him without a qualm. He was a perfect anarchist. He did as he liked. He would walk into your house when you were not looking; kill your cat, disembowel your divan, eat your supper, dismember your boots and shoes, and finally add insult to injury by befouling your bed. To make matters worse, as soon as you raised your foot to kick him, he would bite you in the calf, and run away for ever.

He was temperamental. Sometimes he would run away in terror from a yapping Pomeranian; sometimes he would utter a deep, challenging bark—Bwonk! Bwonk!—and leap at the throat of a bulldog. He had a whole repertoire of barks, of which his favourite was a string of piercing yaps, not unlike a sardonic laugh. He had an unpleasant odour. He was amenable neither to kindness nor brutality. He enjoyed the company of rough little boys. If they tied cans to his tail, he entered into the spirit of the thing; if they painted him green, he rejoiced in the change. But usually, if an adult attempted to stroke him, he would utter a vicious snarl. His chief pleasure, apart from food and the opposite sex, consisted in passing water. It was a treat to watch him; he had a little urine for everything that he encountered. At lamp-posts he had a curious, coy lift of his right hind leg—a gesture exactly similar to that of a punctilious lady who raises her little finger in lifting a teacup.

He was of the earth earthy.

He had amused himself by prowling through the West End. He walked into a barber's shop, left a reminder of his visit on the leg of a chair, and walked out again. He chased a cat into Old Compton Street, and left it, a spitting, spiky black parabola, at the corner of Frith Street. He followed a lady who led a neat little Pekingese on a blue strap; sent the lap-dog into hysterics by sniffing at its hindquarters with his icy

mottled nose; and turned away in disdain. He discovered an unattached female Chow, followed her to Brunswick Square, and left God knows what blots on the escutcheons of canine generations to come. He ate. He slept. He ran three times round the British Museum.

At length, late at night, he found himself in Remington Street. The place was deserted; grey and desolate under the lamp-posts. He lingered. A woman appeared. He walked up to her, to investigate.

It is impossible to say what came over this reprehensible dog in that moment. Perhaps, by means of his instincts, he had some abrupt insight into the anguish of afflicted womanhood. He was a dog ruled by his moods. He offered consolation. He put his grubby paws on Florrie's knees, and licked her cheek.

"Good doggie," sobbed Florrie, "good little doggie. . . . Good old friend. . . . Good old faithful doggie. . . . Come on, then—come on, doggie."

She carried her valise to an all-night café in Southampton Row and the dog followed her.

"Coffee," she said to the waiter, "and some bones, or meat, or something for the dog."

And the dog snuffled up his food at her feet, while she sat there staring into the road.

From time to time, a tear fell down into her untasted coffee.

XI

DINNER WITH JOHN STONE MOGADOR



SINCE Pasta Flava had insisted on the observance of every formality for the occasion of her dinner with John Stone Mogador, Petroneli had wedged himself into a hired dinner-jacket. He seemed always to ignore the fact that his figure was of the kind that no ready-made clothes can fit. Coats that met about his chest had a way of flapping at his ankles. Trousers short enough for his tree-trunk legs invariably went into five or six folds at the waist. Clothes, as a matter of fact, had never interested Petroneli; but for the fascination of Mogador, he had procured a suit which was tight all over, and which, he felt, was consequently smart and sleek. Nobody could imagine how he had got his immense fists through the cuffs. The sleeves appeared to have been glued to his arms. In his violent efforts to squeeze his legs into the trousers, he had burst them at the thighs, and had been compelled to wear the trousers belonging to a blue serge suit. His fair, wiry hair was plastered with a pomade which, though of noticeable perfume, was deficient in fixative properties. From time to time, rebellious wisps suddenly jumped up like broken springs; and Petroneli, who took nothing lying down, constantly suppressed such wayward locks with rapid over-arm punches, each of which would have felled a heifer.

Futtercake had resuscitated a dress-suit of obsolete pattern which was said to have had its origins at the date of Futtercake's coming-of-age party, about forty years previous, and was strained in every fibre. It seemed that if Futtercake took one deep breath, he would suddenly appear in his under-clothes. The velvet lapels bore many souvenirs of forgotten celebrations. There were evidences of a gay night life all down

the front. On the waistcoat there were clues to the sauces and entrées of a decade. His shirt-front shone with a glossiness that was not of linen and starch—but he had fastened it with a mighty topaz stud, which twinkled richly under his threepenny ready-made bow. His patent-leather shoes were extremely new. From time to time he polished them gently on the backs of his legs. His socks were of grey wool.

Kasbek was huge, grey, weary, polite, and remotely picturesque. He was like a large dress-suit filled with smoke; pale, quiet, acquiescent, and somewhat ghostly. He wore a stock, but it seemed only right that he should do so; he carried a monocle with a great gold rim, but it seemed perfectly appropriate. Beneath his tie there hung an Order of Saint Apolonj; but one felt that he had richly deserved it, even if he was not entitled to wear it. It seemed a great pity that he had not a few more orders to wear—he would have looked so well in them.

Bulba had done his best. On close examination, it would have been found that he was spotlessly clean; but a casual observer would have had the impression that Bulba had passed the previous night in an ash-bin. His face was drawn. He held his head erect, but it was as if an invisible hand were pulling it back by the hair. He held his left arm across his bosom with such consistency that it soon became apparent that he was experiencing some difficulty with his shirt-front, which was of paper.

Dita appeared in sequins. Mrs. Glawb had got herself up in pink, so that she resembled a sow in silk. Pasta Flava was wearing her yellow dress, of the colour of sunlight, which belonged to the year 1927; but she was taut with suppressed vivacity. She clutched the wrist of Irene, who had borrowed one of Paula's dresses for this occasion. With her shoes of sleek black *Crêpe-de-Chine*, her closely-fitting dress of black velvet, her discreetly small artificial pearls, and her straight black hair, Irene had glamour.

Mogador looked at her with some interest.

And he was magnificent. It was said that he was worth ten

million pounds; but on looking at him you might have exclaimed: "What, only ten million?" Ten million pounds would have been a bargain price for a man like Mogador. He was so tall, so benign, and so bulky about the chest. He had such a fine head of dark brown hair. He split his face with such a superb white smile, displaying about twenty-six of his perfect teeth. His dress-suit was a work of art, black as midnight, with facings that shone with a sombre splendour. His linen was astoundingly white; imagine camellia-petals laid upon ebony—that was the Mogador shirt-front. His studs were black pearls. He had a stupendous voice. His laugh was like the shaking reverberation of a great golden gong. When he talked, he was a tenor saxophone made articulate with an American accent and strange Scandinavian inflections. Mogador had started with nothing. Rumour afflicted him with unbelievable youthful hardships; he had slept in dunghills and lived on potato-peelings, slept in packing-cases and lived on eggshells, slept standing up against lamp-posts and lived on the smells of cookshops. Twenty years before he had been unheard of; now, he was omnipresent. Predominant on the bourses of Europe, he seemed to have a cook's finger in every high financial pie. He gave Irene one of his famous smiles, and shook her by the hand.

"Glad to know you," he said.

"Charmed," said Irene, almost dumb with awe. Mogador observed this, and was not displeased.

"This is the woman who suffered for me," said Pasta Flava, "she loved me, and so she stood by me. She suffered for me, Mogador, she suffered for me! You see how they all love me! It breaks my heart, I love them so much. Mogador——" her voice broke, "——I don't think any woman was ever loved so much since the beginning of the world. You love me too, don't you, Mogador?"

"Oh yes," said Mogador.

"You see?" cried Pasta Flava. "Now, let's take our seats."

Pasta Flava sat at Mogador's right hand, and Irene sat on his left. At the foot of the table, Futtercake, obscured by a

bowl of flowers, concentrated on the wine. He hoped that there would be peaches to eat. He was inordinately fond of peaches, and, for some inscrutable purpose, carefully preserved the stone of every one that came his way. Petroneli, Dita, and Simson the Samson prepared to enjoy themselves. Simson, having been warned to make himself elegant, had put on a curious, funereal suit, florally decorated at the button-hole with a kind of Hanging Gardens of Babylon composed of sweet peas. At his side, Mrs. Glawb looked daggers across the table at Colonel Bulba.

"What, Mogador, you don't like caviare?" asked Pasta Flava.

"No, I can't say that I do."

"And yet I should have thought that a man like you would love caviare! My dear old friend the Archduke Vladislav was very fond of it. He said to me: 'Pasta Flava, you are the ballerina of my soul, and your perfumed feet dance a wild Lezgouinka on my soul.' He once ate a seven-pound jar of black Astrakhan caviare for a bet of ten thousand roubles. A seven-pound jar of black caviare—that's a rhyme!"

"Must have made him pretty ill," said Mogador. "Seven pounds!"

Pasta Flava nodded sadly.

Kasbek smiled regretfully. He had the appearance now of a deposed monarch. He shook his large grey head.

"Ah, my dear Mr. Mogador," he said, "those were the days! I have the honour to be connected, in a way, with that mighty country of Russia; I knew it well. Give me the old régime! Give me the old régime!" He paused, as if he expected somebody to pass it across the table to him; then continued; "Only men of your gigantic capacity can prevent the spread of such regicide doctrines in the West. If only there had been a man like you in Russia in 1914, sir, the Lenins, and the Trotskys and the Rasputins, and the Keren-skys would have been in their right place in '18, sir—under the ice of the Neva, Mr. Mogador; not under the golden dome of the Kremlin!"

"Very kind of you to say so, Mr. Kasbek," said Mogador, always glad to accept the compliments due to a Mussolini of high finance.

"To John Stone Mogador, one of the girders of our civilisation in the West!" said Kasbek lifting his glass.

With her glass at her lips, Pasta Flava realised that she had already drunk seven glasses of champagne. She remembered that caution was necessary. Then she drained her glass, and decided that, after all, caution was not really so vitally necessary.

"I am irresistibly reminded——" began Bulba.

"Petroneli, pass the wine," said Pasta Flava, "and stop banging yourself on the head like that. I warned you to behave yourself. You see, Mogador, Petroneli is a Pole, and Poles are uncivilised."

"I am irresistibly reminded——" began Bulba, again.

"But," said Kasbek, sweetly, "present company is always excepted."

"I cannot say that I despise the Poles," said Bulba, "I have only one thing against them, and that is their language. It is lacking in virility. It is effeminate. In comparing it with the hissing of serpents, the great Gogol was right."

"Goggle?" said Mrs. Glawb.

"Gogol, a celebrated author." A proud smile came to Bulba's lips as he added: "He wrote of my great ancestor, Taras Bulba."

Mrs. Glawb made a joke:

"The feller what invented the Black Bottom?"

"Madame, the Hetman of the Cossacks, in the year——"

"No, but don't you see the joke? Tar-*ass*; black bottom. See? He-he-he-he-he-he! Er, he-he-he-he-he-he! Oh dear! He-he-he-he-he!"

"If I may be permitted to remind you, Madame——" began Bulba; but Pasta Flava nudged him, and whispered:

"Bulba, my love, keep an eye on Dita. I think she's drinking too much, and you know how she carries on when she gets a bit drunk. That horrible Glawb woman's getting

drunk, too. For God's sake, don't let them make any scenes in front of Mogador. And don't you get drunk, either."

Dita was, in fact, already drunk. She was pale with the blue-grey pallor of flesh seen in the light of a sodium-flame, and sat bolt upright. Her eyes seemed to have receded; they appeared to lie at the bottom of their blackened sockets like cinders that had burned themselves in and expired. Her mouth assumed a mournful twist.

"She's going to make a scene!" whispered Pasta Flava, drinking another glass of wine, and then said: "Well, after all, what if she *does* make a little scene, poor girl. We're only young once."

"Madame! Pasta Flava!" murmured Bulba, "if I were you—I do not think this wine is good; do not drink any more of it, I beg you!"

"Now I can see that you're getting drunk," said Pasta Flava. "To think that Volodia Bulba would let me down!"

Irene gave Mogador an apologetic look.

"Please don't take my friends too seriously," she said, "they're only a little jolly, you understand."

Mogador patted her hand.

"I quite understand, little girl, and I like the way you stand by your friends. Now why not take a little more wine yourself? You're hardly drinking anything."

"I don't like drinking," said Irene.

"Why, it's quite a change, to find a modern young lady with some of the old ideals!" said Mogador, "I can't say I approve of women drinking."

"I think it coarsens them," said Irene.

Dita had been hovering for some minutes on the verge of an outburst. Now she started. She leaned sideways, pinched Mrs. Glawb's arm, and said, very audibly:

"Hey, look at her . . . just look at her . . . making goo-goo eyes at Pasta's millionaire!"

Irene pretended not to hear.

Pasta Flava, also, began to effervesce like the champagne she had drunk. Obliging and affectionately, she tried to

improve the set of Mogador's white bow; gazed at him with coy eyes, and drew circles on his shirt-front with a caressing forefinger.

"Darling," she said, "there's some business I want to discuss with you, later on. Marvellous business."

"Ah?" said Mogador, without much enthusiasm, "well, we'll see. What's this, ices? Well, well!"

An ambassadorial head waiter and two funereal underlings gravely handed little silver dishes.

"Peach Melba!" screamed Mrs. Glawb, clapping her hands, "oh lully, lully, lully!"

Futtercake came out of a coma with a wild start; examined his peach, and shook his head in a heartbroken manner when he found no stone. He had never yet found a stone in a Peach Melba, but he lived in hopes.

"The business I have in hand is this," said Pasta Flava, breathlessly, "you see, Moggie, I want to open a Little Theatre—just a tiny little theatre, for a large number of private members. We're going to put on all sorts of plays—banned plays, and tragedies, and all sorts of plays. Oh, don't you see how marvellous it's going to be? Me, Pasta Flava, the ballerina of souls, with her own little theatre. How everybody will run! . . . You see how it is. Irene suffered for me. She died that I might live, because . . . she loves me so much. The whole point is, everybody loves me, Mogador; everybody. And why? Because I love everybody. Well, they all love me, Mogador! Thousands upon thousands of people would follow me through fire and water, if need be. And if I opened my little theatre, why, all those people who came to see poor old Pasta Flava in the days—in the days—when she danced. . . . Lend me your hankie, Irene dear. . . . They'd all say: 'Pasta Flava is trying to come back . . . let's give the poor old broken-down ball-ballerina of souls one more chance, because we love her so much. . . . Oh-hoooo! Oh-hoooo!'"

"Don't take it to heart," said Mogador. "Don't cry."

"Dear Pasta Flava," murmured Bulba, "be of strong heart."

We will all rise again, to greater heights than before. To overcome adversity, that is also a great thing."

"God bless you, Bulba! You see how wonderful it is to have friends who know you, and love you, and have faith in you? But don't you think my idea's marvellous?"

"Well, not bad. I dare say you could get enough people, but it takes expert handling to run even a little theatre successfully. You don't know very much about it, really, do you?"

"Oh, Mogador! I know all about it. But I wouldn't be concerned with the running, my darling. How could I bother my head with the business side? Art is all I love, Mogador; just art; and all the people, and all the lights, and all the excitement, and everybody about me. . . . Don't you understand, Kasbek's a theatrical expert. He's run companies—touring companies—darling—it's wonderful!"

"And what do you want me to do?"

"I want . . ." Pasta Flava's courage failed her—"I want you to come, and bring your friends."

"Why, of course! Drop me a card as soon as you open."

"Oh, why don't men ever *understand*?" cried Pasta Flava, bursting into tears. "What beasts men are! What beasts!"

Irene nudged Mogador very gently, shook her head in a gesture of deprecation, and indicated an empty bottle with a scarcely perceptible gesture. Under the table, Mogador's foot touched hers.

"Give me some champagne! You don't know what sorrows I have to drown!" cried Pasta Flava.

"She's just a little excited," said Irene, in a low voice. But Pasta Flava heard, and turned upon her in a flaming outburst of anger.

"You swine!" she exclaimed, "leave my men alone! Harpy! This is all the thanks I get, after all I've done for you! You filthy viper! I warm you in my bosom——"

"But wasn't it the other way about?" asked Mogador.

"So it was. Darling, forgive me. She suffered on my account, Mogador—and I promised to hide her under the

shadow of my wing . . . and this is the way I treat her! I'm a wicked woman!"

"Ssh! Ssh!" whispered Irene.

"And as for you, Mogador, what *you* can do is——"

Pasta Flava emptied her glass—"lend me a thousand pounds."

"Hm!" said Mogador.

"Oh," said Pasta Flava, in a small, shocked voice, "Oh. And you said you loved me."

At this moment, Dita glared at Pasta Flava, and grizzled: "Gah! I was a virgin once, which is more than you've ever been!"

Pasta Flava broke down completely. She turned to Mogador, her face dabbled with tears.

"And I gave this woman everything!" she said, hoarsely. "Only yesterday, I lent her five shillings. She borrows my stockings. I gave her two pairs of cami-knickers—and see how much gratitude she shows! Says I wasn't a virgin! Me! Oh God! To say such a thing to me!"

"It's true!" screamed Dita.

"It's a lie!" screamed Pasta Flava.

"Ladies, ladies!" said Kasbek.

"I beg you to leave the table," said Bulba to Dita. But Mrs. Glawb stepped into the breach, and said:

"Don't you chime in. If we want your advice about sandwich-boards, we'll harst you, see?"

"Why don't you go back to your own country?" asked Dita.

"Leave Bulba 'lone; hell of a good scout!" muttered Futtercake.

Bulba became very pale, and said nothing.

Irene was speaking to Mogador:

"It's such a change to meet a man like yourself. Money seems to spoil other people; but they're the kind of people that get their money through sheer luck. But it's so obvious that you've had to fight for everything you've got. I admire you, Mr. Mogador! I'm only saying this to you because I know I shall never be seeing you again. I'd often heard of you,

and now that I've met you, well, I just wanted to speak my mind before I said good-bye." Champagne bubbles danced in her head; she felt bold, full of a hectic recklessness.

"Nice of you to say these things," said Mogador. "It's nice to have somebody get the right angle, for a change. You're about right when you say I've had to fight for all I've got. I've fought right and left. I've smashed men right and left. I'm the best hated man in Europe. Sometimes, I like it. Other times, I feel I need friends. But what makes you say we'll never meet again?"

"Oh, I'd better not see you again."

"Well, why?"

"Oh . . . you know how petty people are. If you were just an ordinary man, I'd jump at the chance; but as you're John Stone Mogador—oh, they'd only say I was after——"

"Say, listen. I don't give a good God damn what anybody says, or thinks, or does. I like you. You're my friend. That's all there is to it. And I don't care what you say, I'm running you back in the car to-night, and I'm taking you to lunch to-morrow. Have you got that? All right——"

"I did give you those green cami-knickers!" cried Pasta Flava.

"Then they must have been green with age," retorted Dita.

"I think, I really think, that you are going a little too far," said Kasbek. He had drunk incessantly, but appeared to have grown graver, greyer, and more sober than before. He touched Dita's elbow in remonstrance. "This will not do. This really will *not* do!"

"Take her away," sobbed Pasta Flava, "Oh take her away!"

Kasbek rose, with a little apologetic bow; towered over Dita, enveloped her, and billowed noiselessly out of the room with her.

Futtercake bobbed up.

"The ladies!" he said, waving a glass; but nobody took any notice of him.

"How do you come to be associated with this crowd?" said Mogador to Irene.

"Adversity makes strange bedfellows," said Irene.

"You're telling me! Well, it's all experience. It's all life——"

"De Polish pipple invented gunpudder!" exclaimed Petroneli, suddenly. He had, apparently, only just thought of a rejoinder to Pasta Flava's denunciation of the Poles.

Animated by sheer *joie de vivre*, Futtercake stood up, put a carnation behind his ear, and uttered his own nightmarish version of a girlish laugh—a noise such as one might make by throwing a shovelful of gravel into a tin pail. And still nobody took any notice of him.

There occurred a sudden hush in the babble at the table, and the voice of Bulba became audible. He was speaking to Kasbek.

"You see that bowl of flowers, sir. Imagine that to be Lake Baikal. You know the Siberian winter. To the North, there was tundra; to the South, unpassable steppes; the enemy was coming from the West; and from the East, there came, all the time, that terrible steady wind, blowing across the water. Consider me, in that situation, as a man surrounded by death—one man alone, Mr. Kasbek." He paused to pour wine. His tired, emphatic voice had commanded the attention of the whole table. He emptied his glass, and went on: "It is a curious thing for me to say to you, at this moment. I was notorious for my pride. I was there alone. I might perhaps have borrowed some clothes, but that was not my way. I could never bring myself to ask a favour. There was something in my mind which . . . put out a hand and stopped the words as they were on my lips. I was freezing to death for want of clothes, my friends; but still I could not ask——"

"Quite right too," said Pasta Flava.

"It is one of the shameful things of my life. I stole. I robbed an American journalist of his trousers. There were a thousand dollars in his wallet, but that I did not touch. I took only the barest necessities. Remember, my friends, that I was running for my life. What is this wild instinct that makes a man save himself for nothing but deep misery?

Only God knows. I took the road northward, intending to rejoin Koltchak. And now I come to the whole point of this sad little story. Picture to yourself the steppe, cold and pitiless. This table cloth is the steppe. This tiny crumb of bread is me, all alone; yesterday, a Colonel of Cossacks, with an estate of a hundred thousand roubles a year; to-day, a homeless outcast, pushing myself against that terrible wind. I could hear, in the distance, the grumbling of artillery. In my mind there was one thought. If only I could find Kharitonenko, the future, at least, would be assured. The miles pass, all those endless miles. Suddenly, I stop. I look. I see blood in the snow; blood and the tracks of feet——”

“Darling!” screamed Pasta Flava, “a blackhead! Right on the end of your nose!”

“Madame?”

“It disfigures you horribly. Let me squeeze it out! Oh, please!”

“Very well, in one moment. As I was saying, there was blood——”

“Oh, Bulba, it’s not such a great thing that I ask, is it? Have I been so unkind to *you*? Just let me have that one blackhead, and I promise never to interrupt again.”

“If it will give you pleasure,” sighed Bulba.

Pasta Flava pressed Bulba’s head against her chest, and meticulously picked out a dark spot at the tip of his nose. She began to squeeze it between her thumbnails.

“Am I hurting you?” she asked.

“Ha, ha, ha! I have been wounded seventeen times, Madame, with bullets, shrapnel, sabres, and knives. I am impervious to pain. Proceed!” said Bulba, with a magnificent gesture——“*Owch!*”

“It won’t come out,” said Pasta Flava, pressing harder. “Darling! It must be like a corn, or something.”

Tears came into Bulba’s eyes. He clenched his teeth. A minute passed. Then Pasta Flava released him, and sat down quietly.

“Is it out?” asked Bulba.

"It was a mistake," said Pasta Flava, "it was only a freckle. But you must let me go over you thoroughly, one day. I love squeezing blackheads. Don't you, Irene?" She observed that Irene was conversing, in an undertone, with Mogador, and said, spitefully: "Ha, she only tries to make men pity her, so that they want to sleep with her!"

"How dare you?" cried Irene. "How could you say such a thing?" She rose.

"You have gone too far," said Mogador, with severity.

"Well, it's all Irene's fault! She *made* me ask you for money for my theatre——"

"Oh, Pasta Flava, how *could* you?"

"So you did!"

"I did not!"

"And I thought you loved me! You said you loved me, Irene; you said you did! But you're jealous of me, you're jealous——"

"Listen," said Mogador, who loved a gesture above all things, "how much did you say you wanted?"

"A thousand pounds," said Pasta Flava.

"Okay."

"You mean to say you'll lend it to me?"

"Yup." Mogador sat down, and breathed into Irene's ear: "Did that for your sake."

"Oh, but you shouldn't have!"

"Think nothing of it," said Mogador.

Pasta Flava yelped with joy. She grasped a waiter by an ear, and said: "You see, darling? You see how they all love Pasta Flava? You see how they're all ready to do anything for poor old Pasta Flava?"

The waiter nodded gloomily.

Kasbek sat still, finishing his cigar with a serene and judicial air.

Bulba fixed a grey and weary stare on the bottom of his empty glass. He was sombre and preoccupied. Freed from his restraining hand, his shirt-front curled up like the petal of a strange flower. . . .

"How time goes!" said Mogador, looking at his watch. He rose. Pasta Flava covered his cheeks with kisses.

"I'll drive you home," said Mogador to Irene.

The party broke up.

THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION OF FAMILY HARMONY



THEY paused on the pavement. A commissionaire waved his hands, and, as if drawn on invisible strings, taxis emerged from the darkness.

"It's all been so perfectly wonderful!" exclaimed Pasta Flava.

"A charming little evening," said Mogador, pressing Irene's elbow.

Irene, almost weeping with emotion, her higher faculties numb with wine, was convinced that this was a dream. She drew a deep breath, closed her eyes tightly, and then opened them suddenly, steeling herself for the sight of her bedroom and the querulous yapping of her father's voice.

But the scene remained; the street, the traffic, the merging groups of elegant people, the kaleidoscopic changing of a hundred thousand coloured lights, and the golden-grey, swirling, shouting disc of Paccadilly.

"Come in our taxi," said Pasta Flava to Bulba. "Where can we drop you?"

"Thank you, my dear friend, I would rather walk a little," said Bulba, "I need air, and exercise."

Pasta Flava and her satellites loaded themselves into two taxis. Two mixed loads of vociferous exultation, ponderous stupidity, vinous nausea, crapulent melancholy, and cool cunning were enclosed by slamming doors and swallowed by the lumpy current of traffic flowing down Haymarket.

And now Mogador's car dominated everything. It was an ivory-coloured Rolls-Royce, which conveyed an impression of optical illusion. When you stood by it, it was low; when you sat inside it, it was lofty. It was a little purring palace,

as rich and as smooth as cream. It was fantastic. You pressed a button, and up popped a table; you touched a switch, and out jumped a cocktail-cabinet; you pulled a lever, and the back seat became a kind of double bed upon which you might comfortably have begotten a family while travelling at sixty miles an hour. Of all the rich men of the earth, only John Stone Mogador could have possessed such a car.

"You see, I seldom travel by railroad," said Mogador, demonstrating the cocktail-cabinet, "so I had the car fixed."

"Erm!" Irene could find no words.

"It's specially sprung. You can write quite comfortably in this automobile. It's so steady, you could probably play pool in here—" Mogador paused, suddenly, as if it had just occurred to him that he needed to instal some miracle of collapsibility in the form of a billiards-table. "Ahem, yes. All in all, it cost me eight thousand pounds."

"E-eight thousand pounds?"

"Yes. But don't run away with the idea that I care for luxury. No. I've always lived hard. I like it. I'm used to hard living; it keeps me young, roughing it. Now how old would you say I was?"

Irene reasoned rapidly—he looked about forty-two; therefore, he was at least fifty. She said—"Thirty-eight."

"I'm forty-five."

"No!"

"It's a fact. Not a grey hair in my head, either. Look!"

"You've got awfully nice hair."

"And not a tooth missing. See——"

"Oh, what a marvellous set of teeth!"

"Not so bad for my age. And my chest still measures a few inches more than my waist. It's work that does it, just plain hard work. I've struggled all my life. That's what's kept me fit, struggling. I always say to people who start that 'Wolf of Wall Street' stuff—'I'm not a business-man. I'm a worker.' And you may believe me or believe me not, I mean it, every word! My tastes are very simple. Really, I'd be quite content to dine off a cup of coffee and a sandwich, the same as I

did twenty years back. I have all these things because I've got no other way of spending my money after I've made it. . . . Pleasure, enjoyment, yes; but luxury, no. I'm a plain man. A worker."

"And a fighter!" cried Irene.

"Yes, I've fought the world. I've fought the businessmen. I'm still fighting 'em. And they don't love me for it. Even while I sit here, talking to you, you can safely bet your bottom dollar that a dozen groups of men are getting together all over Europe and America, and scheming how they can nail John Stone Mogador to the cross."

"Oh . . . But isn't it awfully thrilling, just the same?"

"Thrilling! I'll say it is. It's the fighting I like, not the money," said Mogador, with emotion. "Why, if I went around with a guitar, or a six-shooter, or any of that Robin Hood truck, I'd feature in all the kiddies' picture-books as a heroic outlaw. But because I don't kill anybody, I'm a pariah——"

"Just like one man standing on a mountain," said Irene, remembering Mirliton.

"That's not bad."

"Ishmael in the wilderness, your hand against every man's, and every man's hand against you," said Irene, quoting one of Mirliton's high-millinery heartbreaks.

"Just like that."

"But I should have thought that with all your money, you'd have hundreds of women all running after you."

"Oh, I have. Yes, plenty of people are glad enough to be nice to me, you bet," said Mogador, grimly, "but I can see through 'em. Yes. When I was a kid, they let me starve. When I was a young man, I had to fight 'em—tooth and nail, nothing barred; scratching, biting, gouging, kicking, and butting below the belt. But now, I'm John Stone Mogador, and they like me for my money. If I went smash tomorrow, how many women out of all the women that chase me now would look at me? Not one!" Mogador's bitter, retrospective mood intensified. He gripped Irene's hand.

"When I was a youngster, I had no time to bother with women. Later on, I simply bought 'em. It's all a matter of money with me, now. I've got no tenderness. I'm gall, and aloes, and alum, and salt, all mixed up. I see through 'em all—every one. I wouldn't trust any woman not to let me down—except my old mother and she's dead——"

"Oh . . ."

"I can buy women, high women; but with 'em, I don't belong. They're after money. I know it. They know I know it. It's understood—an unwritten contract. At first, I liked women like that. I got a kick out of buying them. But afterwards, they got so obvious. They couldn't help showing what they were after, somehow. They took away my appetite."

"Poor man."

"I want you to see what I mean. I can feel at ease with a girl of my own kind, like you. But what chance do I get to meet one? With you, I feel at home. I don't suspect you as soon as you show your teeth. I come from the lower classes. My mother was a Bohunk scrub-woman; my father was a Swede farmhand. I suspect the upper-class women. But you, you belong to my class. I can talk to you."

"My mother used to go out scrubbing," said Irene, eagerly.

"There you are!" said Mogador, conclusively.

"And now I support the family."

"Is that so? What with?"

"I worked in a hat-shop up to a few days ago. Then they gave me the sack."

"And now, what?"

"Oh, I'll find another job easily enough," said Irene bravely, "even if I have to be a waitress, or something."

"Don't you worry!" said Mogador, putting an arm round her.

This is simply not possible! thought Irene. *This is simply not happening. This is a dream. This is——*

"Now what was I saying?" said Mogador. "Oh yes. It's a refreshing thing for a man like me to meet a girl like yourself."

I don't know quite how to put it. Ah. When I smell cheap soap, it sort of gives me a thrill—it makes me think of the smell of my mother's hands. See? And when I see you, and talk to you, it's like going back a couple of dozen years, to the time when I used to walk round the block with Helga Stromqvist, old Oscar Stromqvist's daughter. You can behave like a girl that likes caviare, and is used to swell dinners; but at heart, you're just a plain, common, simple girl. And that's what I like about you."

"I am a simple girl, at heart."

"Yes. Well, say I like you? Say I take a fancy to you? What then?" Mogador consulted a tiny diary, and made an entry. "One-thirty sharp in the Oriflamme to-morrow, for lunch," he said, "I'll expect you."

"Oh, oh, but——"

"Yes or no?"

"I'd love to."

"That's a good girl. Then we can have a chat about things, eh?"

"I was going after a job in Garridge's Stores to-morrow," lied Irene, "but I don't care if I don't get it."

"Don't worry about *that*," said Mogador, significantly, and gently pulled her head down to his shoulder. "You want a *job*? I'll give you a job. You're my personal secretary, starting from to-morrow."

"Oh!"

"Salary. Salary? Well, what salary?"

"But——"

"I pay my secretaries a thousand pounds a year. Salary, one thousand a year."

"One thousand a year! Oh, but I don't know anything about secretarial work! I—I can't do shorthand, or type-writing——"

"You won't have to," said Mogador, softly.

Irene came near to fainting.

The car stopped. The suburb of Turners Green was asleep.

"One-thirty at the Oriflamme, to-morrow," said Mogador, "don't forget. Good night, kid."

"Good night!"

The car was gone, and Irene was alone on the pavement. She experienced a sense of maddening doubt, such as comes to one who emerges from a vivid dream. Herself and Mogador. It could not be; and yet it was.

She looked about her, with dazed eyes.

The night itself was scenic, like something out of a grotesque German film; vivid, theatrical, and unreal. The sky was curdled darkness, shattered in one place by the ineffable silver of a full moon. Everything was clearly defined. The light on the walls and pavements was hard, glittering tin; the shadows were crisp black paper. There was a thick silence.

Then, abruptly, from the open throat of some remote cat there proceeded a swelling cry of passion and pain. A vapour drifted over the moon; the clouds encroached and blotted it out. The white glamour of the moonlight was gone—snatched like a veil from the hideous and familiar face of the suburb. The night waited, measureless, timeless, cold, without law and order, silent, pregnant with unfathomable mystery, and utterly devoid of light; while Turners Green, policeman-guarded, sprawled sleeping in the yellow rays of its street-lamps.

"It *is* true." Irene told herself, "*it must* be true! Oh, won't Paula be annoyed!"

She opened the door, and went upstairs.

Considerate of the sleeping household, she paused on the first-floor landing to take off her shoes, and even as she stooped, she became aware of a qualm of misgiving. The respectable, monogamous, instinctively law-abiding Irene struggled to the surface, and remonstrated with Impulse:

"Hey, what are you so excited about, anyway? Because this Mogador man wants you to be his secretary? You know what that means, don't you? It means be his mistress, for twenty pounds a week!"

"No . . . his secretary."

"Stupid! Why try and deceive yourself? You're going to sell yourself, like a bad woman. After this, you're a kept woman. You'll never have a home, and children."

"Who cares? Where does it get you——"

"Fool, to take notice of Paula! She wouldn't be such a fool."

"But I'll never have such a chance again! Money, jewellery, dresses. . . ."

"It's not the right thing to do. Besides, what will the neighbours say?"

"Well, hang it all, I must escape from this. This wretched home. Nobody need know. I can always say I'm working late, or going away on business. . . ."

"Do you love Mogador?"

"Well, . . . I don't know . . ."

"Do you love Mogador?"

"Well . . . I think he's awfully nice."

"Do you *love* Mogador?"

"No, but . . ."

"H'm! Do you want to go to bed with him, even? Do you think you'd like to?"

"I wouldn't mind. He's got nice hair, and lovely teeth, and a fine figure."

"So you're going to let him buy you?"

"Well? Well? What the hell if I am? Am I to stay here, and be bullied for the rest of my life, just because of all those silly old ideas? I let William make love to me, but I didn't love him any more afterwards. I'll do as I please."

"Prostitution."

"No more than if I married for money. No more than if I married just for a home."

"Prostitution!"

Irene put aside this chaos of conflicting desires and scruples on the shelf of a new possibility.

"Perhaps he was joking, or drunk," she said to herself. "We'll see, to-morrow."

At this point, she found herself outside Paula's room. A line of light shining under the door indicated that Paula was still awake. Irene knocked gently, and peeped in.

(2)

Paula, recently returned from a dance, was massaging her face with cold cream before going to bed. She greeted Irene with some surprise:

"Hallo, Irene! Why so late?"

"Been to dinner," said Irene, "at the Cosmopolis."

Paula whistled. "Cosmopolis, eh? Who with?"

"Pasta Flava, and a whole crowd."

"Oh yes, that's the dancer you told me about. Was it a nice dinner?"

"Oh, marvellous. Oh, Paula . . ."

"Mm?"

"You remember Pasta Flava said she'd help me to get another job, and introduce me to people?"

"Yes?"

"She introduced me to a *marvellous* man!"

"Really?"

"And awfully rich. He's offered me a job—he wants me to be his secretary, at a tremendous salary—a thousand a year!"

"What, a thousand pounds a year? Oho, it's like that, is it? Well, my dear, make the most of it. Is he an old man?"

"Mature; but he looks young."

"Englishman?"

"American, I think."

"What name?"

"You must promise you won't tell."

"As if I would!"

"John Stone Mogador."

Paula's fingers came to a stop on the creamed surfaces of her cheeks. Her lips parted.

"What, John Stone Mogador? The mil——"

"Yes, isn't it marvellous?"

"Are you sure?"

"Good heavens, my dear!" exclaimed Irene, "D'you think I'd associate with any Tom, Dick, or Harry?"

This, from Irene to Paula, was an unparalleled turning of the tables—it was as if a mouse had said "miaouw" to a cat. Paula was startled. She looked thoughtfully at Irene, and resumed her face-massage.

"Mogador prefers girls of my type," said Irene, loftily. "Girls of his own type—quiet, womanly, and not too sophisticated. You see, Paula, it doesn't always pay to pretend to be what you're not."

"No," said Paula, meekly, with a sidelong glance, "I suppose not."

Irene swelled with triumph. She had achieved what Paula had failed to achieve; she was laying down the law, and Paula was listening.

It seemed too good to be true. As a matter of fact, it was too good to be true.

"You see, Paula dear, I always did think that the finest types of men prefer the simpler kinds of girl; only I didn't want to argue with you."

"Sure there isn't some catch in it?" asked Paula, after a moment of deep thought; still regarding Irene out of the corners of her eyes.

"How d'you mean?"

"Well . . . if your man's really John Stone Mogador, he must be awfully mean to offer you no more than twenty pounds a week. Of course, I realise that there are extras, like jewels, and furs . . . But still, it seems so little to let yourself go for——"

"I can assure you that he really is John Stone Mogador," said Irene, with asperity.

"On what authority?"

"Oh Paula, don't be ridiculous! If everybody knows him as Mogador, he must be Mogador!"

"I don't say that it isn't possible."

"Oh Paula, I wish you could see him. He's so *dominant*!"

"Introduce me, some time."

"I will!"

"You know," said Paula, apologetically, "I only believe what I see."

"You'll see!" said Irene, with some irritation. "I'll introduce you the very first opportunity I get, and then you'll see if I'm right."

"Well, dear; we'll see."

And so Irene went to bed, already burning with a desire to crush Paula with the superb presence of John Stone Mogador; and Paula, lying back in her chair, winked at the ceiling—a wicked, knowing, private wink.

(3)

Irene was awakened at eight by the invariable morning upheaval. Emerging from the complete obliteration of deep sleep into the sweet Nirvana of a timeless doze, she gradually became conscious of a sharp voice, persistent, nerve-racking, with the regular retching-whining cadence of rusty gate-hinges."

"Oh, *why* am I to lie here like a dog," it clamoured, "with my tongue hanging out of my mouth, and nobody to have the kindness and thoughtfulness to bring me in a cup of tea? I'm a sick man. Oh, *why* doesn't somebody make tea? Oh God, why doesn't somebody make tea?"

"The kettle's just on the boil," said Mrs. Jackson, in a soothing voice.

"Let Irene make a cup of tea!" cried Oswald, "Lazy little cat!"

Irene listened to this with a gust of anger.

"Stay here!" she said, aloud. "For this! What a fool I'd be!" She called, urgently: "Oh, mother! Come in here a minute, will you?"

Mrs. Jackson appeared in the doorway.

"What's the matter?" she asked, "Aren't you well, dear?"

"No, I'm all right. Listen, mother; I've got a secret. Swear you won't tell a soul?"

"Why, what is it?"

"Swear you won't tell?"

"Well, all right. What is it?"

"I don't want you to say anything inside yet, in case anything happens—but I've got a wonderful job."

"Go on!"

"Sort of confidential secretarial work. Guess what salary!"

"Four pounds a week?"

"Ten pounds a week," whispered Irene. Twenty pounds was a sum she dared not name. "Ten pounds a week!"

"You're joking."

"No, it's true."

"Who's your guvner?" asked Mrs. Jackson, with sudden suspicion.

"John Stone Mogador, the financier."

"It sounds too good to be true, to me."

"But it is true, mother! I'll get you a flat, and a servant."

Tears came into Mrs. Jackson's eyes.

"But don't say a word to the others!" said Irene. "Promise!"

"No, I won't say anything yet."

"Mo-ther!" shouted Oswald, "Mo-ther!"

"Coming!" cried Mrs. Jackson, hurrying out.

Irene lay back, pulled the blankets over her head, and dozed again. She was warm and drowsy. Her head was full of a warm fog of vague, pleasant speculation . . .

A quarter of an hour passed. Somebody came into the room. She heard the clink of a teaspoon against a saucer, and looked up.

Shock sent sleep flying, and left her broad awake and startled. She sat up, holding her night-dress to her bosom. She rubbed her eyes and stared, incredulously.

With an ingratiating smile, Oswald was bringing her a cup of tea.

XIII

YOUNG MEN IN LOVE



AGAIN Douglas Barker sat at lunch with Nellie Hay. His food lay untasted before him—a poached egg on mashed potato; a pair of rye biscuits, like charred visiting-cards; a glutinous frustum of malted milk covered with a crinkly albuminous scum. It was not that his appetite balked at this pallid vegetarian fare. Disheartenment choked him. He looked into the grey eyes of Nellie Hay, and sank beneath a realisation of her remoteness.

Nellie, however, ate. She burst the yolk of her egg, and churned up the mashed potatoes into a kind of slush, which she took in minute forkfuls. From time to time, she broke off a square of rye biscuit, and popped it hastily into her tiny mouth.

Observe, by the way, how women of this type always keep everything closed—how they smile, laugh, talk, and eat with their mouths shut; walk with little steps, as if terrified of parting their legs; seal their minds against everything that does not smell of lavender—in short, how they live under a lid, bunched up, shunning the hard white light of noonday, trussed hens that they are! Only their bowels of compassion are open. They always ooze watery pity; that soft, insidious, degrading pseudo-virtue.

Nellie, therefore, insinuated her egg and potato into her reluctantly-opening mouth. Regularly, at every third mouthful, she put down her knife and fork, and dabbed at her lips with a napkin, with the nervous haste of one who removes a revolting stain.

“How lady-like!” said Douglas, to himself.

“Come now,” said Nellie, “you’re not eating.”

"I've got an awful pain in my side," lied Douglas.

"Which side?"

"The right."

"Oh! Low down?"

"Yes, rather."

"Oh, you poor boy! Is it a sharp pain, a sort of pricking pain?"

"Um, that's it."

"Oh, Douglas, it must be your appendix!"

"I'm afraid it must be," sighed Douglas.

"But do drink your milk."

"Oh . . . I don't think——"

"Now be a good boy!"

Douglas drank his malted milk in short sips, occasionally wincing like a man in great pain.

"There's a good boy!" said Nellie.

"I haven't been able to sleep, either," said Douglas.

"Because of the pain?"

"No—well, partly; but mainly because of thoughts."

"What thoughts?"

"Oh . . . something."

"Do tell me. Perhaps I can relieve you, or help to take away some of your suffering."

"I've been thinking about somebody."

"Who?"

"Somebody I like. I say, Nellie."

"Yes?"

"I dare say you have a lot of boys who like you and want to take you out, eh?"

"Well, a few. But really, I'm not interested in boys, not just to go out with."

"Not just to go out with?"

"No. Not unless I was serious. There's no use going out with a boy unless you're serious about him, is there?"

"No, no use at all."

"Do eat your egg now. It won't hurt you. Yes, I used to go out with a boy called Ernest. He was an awfully nice boy, but

rather a flirt. He had infantile paralysis, and had to go about in a chair."

"Did you like him?"

"Yes, I did rather."

"Enough to marry him?"

"Well, I might have. He was an awfully nice boy. He was quite serious about me, too. But he wasn't in a position to marry, and what's the use of liking a boy if he's not in a position to marry?"

"N-no use at all."

"And then there was Robert—he was T.B., and such a nice boy! But he died."

"Did you like him better than Ernest?"

"Oh yes! He was a nice boy."

"I suppose you like him better than anybody else you ever met. . . ."

"Oh, I don't know. I think I liked Eric best."

"Oh, Eric. What was the matter with him?"

"He was mental—but not all the time, only at full moon. And he had a withered leg, in irons, poor dear. Poor Eric! Poor boy!"

"Nellie, do you like me?"

"Why, what a funny question! I don't know. You're quite nice, I think."

"I like you."

Nellie blushed.

"Do you think you like me enough to go out with me for always?" asked Douglas.

"Oh . . . I don't know, I'm sure. . . ."

"Say yes, Nellie!"

"Well, I *think* so."

"Oh, and Nellie, do you think that if I had a lot of money you might . . . marry me?"

"I might, if I got to like you well enough, and you were serious, and in a position—You know, if I had money, I'd like to do *good* with it."

"I'm sure you would!"

"I'd open a home for sick animals. Starving people who couldn't afford to keep their animals would bring them to me, to be cared for. Don't you think that's fine?"

"Oh, I do! Would you come for a walk with me to-morrow evening?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"I'd like to ask you to-night, only my sister's bringing home her fiancé, and they want me to meet him."

"Well, I'll see. Goodness me, nearly ten to two! We'd better fly!"

They paid their bills, and hurried back to the office.

When he reached his desk, Douglas proceeded to fill in the weekly cash-cheque. It was for four hundred pounds. He stared at the pink oblong. He was unable to look away from it.

He held it to the light, and looked into it; turned it over, and gazed at the blank white back.

As he wrote in "Four hundred pounds", he felt his heart beat.

Little, amorphous, unformulated ideas crawled into his mind, like shadows.

Douglas shuddered, and bit his finger.

"Good God!" he said to himself. "What am I beginning to think of? Good God, what a terrible thing, to have such thoughts in your mind!" And he hastily covered the cheque with his hand.

In a mind fed on the maxim: *Only fools work*, the slightest stimulus may bring about the most astonishing reactions. The undercurrent of one's consciousness always sucks back to its beginnings.

Douglas felt his face grow hot. He sent the cheque into the central office to be signed, and, for the moment, was glad to be rid of it. But for the rest of the day he was unable to concentrate on his work. His head was full of indefinable trouble. It was with relief that he put on his bowler hat, at six o'clock, and hurried home to meet Edna's boy-friend, James Todd.

(2)

James Todd was a sane, not over-imaginative young man, but the portentousness of this interview made him nervous. There is always something ominous and terrifyingly suggestive of finality about one's first meeting with a girl's family.

Now, as he passed through the shop, he found himself thinking of some half-forgotten fairy-story—one of those ancient tales with an undertone of horror, born of dark forest-lands. A man goes into an enchanted wood, and the path closes behind him; branches become hands, which pluck at him: invisible eyes scrutinise him. The door closed with a bang, like the door of a trap. A card of aspirin-tablets brushed his hair; a cardboard packing-case investigated his legs, rubbing smoothly past them like a cat; a dangling toy trumpet touched his cheek with its icy mouth. Then he was in the shop-parlour, nervously adjusting his tie. Mrs. Barker, in a black dress trimmed with green, regarded him sombrely. She was out to make a good impression. Her green cuff and puffy whitish hand flopped at him like a squashed arum-lily on a broken stalk.

"How do you do?" said Mrs. Barker.

"Pleased to meet you," stammered Todd.

It seemed to him that Douglas was extremely genteel in his dark blue suit, his winged collar, and his pained expression.

"Ah, this is Douglas," said Todd, in a friendly manner, "I've heard such a lot about you. I've often wanted to meet you!"

"Tmeech!" snapped Douglas, touching Todd's extended hand.

Todd broke into a cold sweat.

Paula came in, and she was so beautiful that Todd blushed.

"Why, it's dear old Jimmy Todd!" exclaimed Paula. "Dear old Jimmy, from the Debating Society! How are you?"

Todd gratefully wrenched at her hand, and there was a long silence.

"Nice day," said Todd, after a while.

"But it looks like rain," replied Edna, earnestly.

"The weather report says rain," said Douglas, off-handedly.

"Yes," said Todd, "I'm afraid it *will* rain."

"Shall I make tea?" asked Edna.

"Sit still, dears," said Mrs. Barker. Turning to Todd, she explained: "It's always been my pleasure to wait on my children hand and foot. Other mothers go out and enjoy themselves, but my children are my pleasure in this world; they're my one enjoyment. Waiting on them hand and foot is like picture-palaces to me."

She limped out of the room, followed by Edna.

"Yes," said Paula, who was in a mischievous mood, "you'd never need to spend money on cinemas, if you came here much. Douglas is a scream—just like a burlesque on a melodrama."

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" roared Todd; but Douglas laid a hand on his tie, and coughed with such dignity that the laughter died.

For a minute nobody spoke. Todd, feverishly combing his brain for something to say, finally found an opening gambit.

"Well, why all this silence?" he asked.

Nobody replied.

Mrs. Barker returned, followed by Edna with the tea-tray.

"Aha!" said Todd, "the cup that cheers but not inebriates."

"There's nothing like a nice cup of tea," said Mrs. Barker. "Although some people say it's bad for the stomach. But we only use the best. The best of everything. Poor Mr. Barker always used to say: 'The best is not good enough for my family.'"

This had the sound of some subtle derogatory allusion to Todd. Edna frowned.

They took their seats. Douglas, who had previously given voice to grave doubts as to the seriousness of Todd's intentions, picked up the sugar-basin, and began, in a terrible voice:

"Mr. Todd! Do you intend——"

"Douglas, be *quiet!*" cried Edna.

"——to take sugar?" concluded Douglas.

"No thanks—yes please. . . . Two—no, one lump," said the demoralised Todd.

Still the silence persisted. Paula, with a wicked twinkle in her eyes, deliberately held her peace. Edna, watching her, feared that some mischief was brewing.

Suddenly Paula began:

"Oh, Jimmy, I hear that the Debating Society is quite a den of vice, these days."

"Vice?" said Todd, startled. "Oh no!"

"But I hear that they've been discussing Dostoyefsky."

"That's quite true," said Todd, "but Dostoyefsky——"

"Ssh! Not in front of mother!" said Paula.

Mrs. Barker gave Todd a look.

"But there's no harm in Dostoyefsky," protested Edna.

"Oh, Mr. Todd, I'm afraid you've been leading our Edna astray," said Paula, reproachfully.

"Hm!" exclaimed Douglas.

"Tell me," said Paula, "do *you* approve of Dostoyefsky?"

Douglas, needless to say, had never read the works of Dostoyefsky, but instantly assumed that even Paula had found him improper. He said in a hushed voice:

"I do not. But there are some so-called modern thinkers who try to justify him."

"But you don't, I hope?" said Paula.

"The Russians have a different moral code," said Douglas.

"These foreigners!" sighed Mrs. Barker.

"Dostoyefsky's absolutely harmless!" cried Edna, putting down her teacup with a bang.

"You see," said Paula, despairingly, "these quiet ones are always the worst."

"You're sure you weren't thinking of D. H. Lawrence?" asked Douglas.

"Quite definitely Dostoyefsky," said Paula, "but perhaps we'd better drop the subject."

"Hardly a table topic," said Douglas.

"Hm!" said Mrs. Barker, significantly, "Erm! Ts, ts, ts! Very nice. *Very* nice."

Paula, however, was helpless with suppressed laughter. She pressed a handkerchief to her mouth, and drummed on the floor with her feet; while Todd, with a sickly grin, chewed a piece of Madeira cake.

The meal concluded. Edna cleared the table. Mrs. Barker sat back in her chair and confronted Todd with matriarchal dignity.

Gradually, she delivered herself of a pre-marital questionnaire.

(3)

"You work at Jonathon's, I hear?" said Mrs. Barker.

"Yes, that's right," said Todd.

"Everybody tells me it's such a nice place. Have you been there long, Mr. Todd?"

"Oh yes, nearly ten years."

"Of course, far be it from me to believe everything I'm told, but a friend of mine, a certain Mrs. Richardson—Richardsons, of the High Street, I don't know if you know them—she told me they paid you very poorly there."

"Well, Mrs. Barker, you understand how it is; you start small, and rise, if you're worth it."

"You didn't think me rude, for asking?"

"No no, oh no no!"

"I know you must think I'm an awful nosey old woman; but do they pay you well now?"

"Oh, I get about eight pounds a week."

"Ooo! You must be quite a big man there!"

"Well . . . I'm manager of their Overseas Department."

"Really, now!" cried Mrs. Barker, with increased affability, "and are your people alive?"

"No, both dead. I have a sister, but I don't see anything of

her. She married a South African fellow—quite well off, I hear.”

“Oh! So your parents have passed away? What did they die of?”

“My father died of pneumonia——”

“There now! My hubby died of the same thing! Now what a coincidence!”

“——And my mother died of a growth, I believe.”

“Kill yourself for your children, and that’s what you get for it,” commented Mrs. Barker.

“The growth was in the throat,” said Todd.

“Ah, the throat,” said Mrs. Barker, disparagingly. “A friend of mine, a Mrs. Liggett, had a tumour in her inside that weighed twenty-two pounds.”

“Good heavens!” cried Todd.

“It wasn’t really a tumour,” said Paula, “the surgeon discovered that he’d left one of his assistants inside her——”

“How can you say such things?” cried Mrs. Barker. “You bad girl! It *was* a tumour!”

“Oh yes; I was thinking of Mrs. Socket. That’s right. Mrs. Liggett won the silver cup for the record tumour. She had it stuffed——”

“Don’t be revolting!” said Douglas. Turning to Todd, he said: “Well, Mr. Todd, it’s good to hear that somebody’s doing well, these days.”

“Do you find business good?” asked Todd.

“Just fair.”

“Do you know what?” said Todd, with a sudden inspiration. “I think you’d have done well in the Diplomatic Service!”

“Oh, oh,” said Douglas, modestly.

But Mrs. Barker prepared to finish Todd off. Figuratively speaking, she spat on her hands, and returned to the onslaught:

“My Edna’s such a good girl, Mr. Todd. One of the best. And even as a baby, she was as good as gold—and so clean; you wouldn’t believe.”

"Oh yes," said Todd, politely.

"Even as a baby, she used to wake me up in the middle of the night, and cry to be held down."

"I can well believe it," said Todd.

"Tell him about her chicken-pox," suggested Paula.

"Yes, she was as patient as a lamb," declared Mrs. Barker. "Not a cry, not a sound. She suffered in silence, like her mother. Poor Mr. Barker always used to say—and he was a man in a thousand; never a cross word did I get from him. Some men must have their cigarette, and their glass of ale, but Mr. Barker, never. And never a swear-word passed his lips. Oh, he came from a very nice family. The very first time my poor father set eyes on him, he said: 'He's a perfect gent'—and my father knew a gentleman when he saw one. He was in the building line. Yes, Mr. Todd, I've always lived for my kiddies. I don't know what I shall do without my Edna. She was the best of them all; my favourite child, although I never did favour one more than another. Well, I bear it all, Mr. Todd; I suffer in silence, and keep my sorrows here—" she pointed to her liver—"and thank God that I'll soon leave this wicked world for a better place. . . ."

Under the table, Edna clasped Todd's hand, and pressed it warmly.

Todd experienced a sinking feeling. At the back of his mind, a muffled voice protested, vaguely:

"Hey! . . . what the devil? . . . what the devil. . . ?"

XIV

KASBEK NEGOTIATES



DUSKY and immense, silent on his rubber heels, amorphous in his loose clothes of soft grey flannel, Kasbek drifted down Wigmore Street. The westerly breeze seemed to propel him, for he moved without apparent muscular effort; a floating background; a three-dimensional half-shadow. In his vague grey face, his eyes had the surprising and inappropriate hardness of two jet beads embedded in a puff of smoke.

He paused at the entrance to a block of flats, rolled back his large, sessile head in order to look at the numbers; then poured himself through the doorway, and got into the lift. The lift rose, as if Kasbek were a buoyant influence.

"Mrs. Glawb, third door on the right," said the lift-boy.
"Thank you, my lad," said Kasbek.

In this block of flats, Mrs. Glawb occupied three airless rooms. Her drawing-room resembled a haunt of the gay lads of the 'nineties. It was a stuffiness hemmed in with mirrors. There was a woolly carpet, and a square-rigged gas-fire of antique pattern. The piano and the mantelpiece bore a photographic record of the life of Mrs. Glawb—Mrs. Glawb in a botanical hat; Mrs. Glawb with a seventeen-inch waist; Mrs. Glawb in tights, all bosom and thigh; Mrs. Glawb in a cart-wheel hat, leaning gracefully against a cardboard tree; Mrs. Glawb with a thirty-five-inch waist, and a fan; Mrs. Glawb with a seventeen-inch neck, swathed in gauze; Mrs. Glawb with a forty-five-inch waist; Mrs. Glawb with no neck.

In spite of her wealth, her avarice was phenomenal. She found a source of grief in every expenditure, and coveted her neighbour's goods with a passionate intensity. She contrived to eat almost every meal at somebody else's expense. And, like so many large women, she was full of terrors. She feared

strong sunlight, because people died of sunstroke; she feared the cold, because people died of pneumonia. Ill-dressed men filled her with a dread of robbery with violence; suave, well-dressed men made her think of confidence-tricksters and poisoners. Anything black reminded her of death; hence her partiality to pink and pale blue, which symbolised youthfulness and life. She shuddered at hunchbacks, blind men, big dogs, cart-horses, cats, cows, negroes, men who coughed, and at newspaper reports of burglaries, assaults, and deaths from overwork. Above all things, she feared loneliness. Her horrors were always waiting for her; and as soon as she was alone, they crept out and gibbered at her. As soon as the night came, she had to look for company—any kind of company—even if it involved the purchase of five shillings-worth of whisky. She pursued chance acquaintances with the panic of the gregarious animal strayed from the herd. At night, she would switch on every light in the flat, and lock all the windows to keep out the things that inhabit the darkness; and then she would experience the choking horrors of claustrophobia. The chiming of clocks in the small hours sent cold shudders down her back. She never dared to look out of a window, because she expected to see misshapen things hopping in the road. She was particularly appalled at the sight of old women lying asleep in dark doorways—an ancient, instinctive fear, common to many people, having its roots in the witch-ridden past.

Now, as Kasbek arrived, at eleven in the morning, she was preparing to dress.

Unpainted and unadorned. She filled her vieux-rose dressing-gown, and overflowed—a bale of unmanageable blubber. Her mouth might have been a deep wrinkle. She sipped a cup of tea, and regarded Kasbek dubiously.

“Pardon my calling so early,” said Kasbek, “but it is necessary to bring the preliminary negotiations to a rapid conclusion. You are aware, dear lady, that Mr. Mogador has sent us his cheque for a thousand pounds?”

“Has he?”

"I have it here." Kasbek held out Mogador's cheque. Mrs. Glawb devoured it with her eyes.

"On his private account, too! Well I never! Who would of thought it?"

"Mr. Mogador knows a good thing when he sees it, madame."

"Oh, I know. You know, Mr. Kasbek, you can't tell me nothing I don't know already about John Stone Mogador."

"Indeed?"

"My hubby's connected with him. You heard of Buckaroo Timber?"

"Yes."

"You heard of Volatile Oils?"

"Most certainly."

"My hubby's one of the directors."

"Indeed? And Mr. Mogador is the managing director, I take it?"

"Something like that. My hubby and Mogador, they sort of worked together, years ago. So you see, I ain't a nobody!" said Mrs. Glawb, aggressively.

"I can tell that by your air," said Kasbek, "It is always easy for a discriminating observer to distinguish between a lady like yourself and one of the mob."

"So you see, I don't pretend to be what I ain't, and that's why I can't understand Pasta Flava mixing up with people like that Colonel man. Colonel! I seen him carrying sandwich-boards with my own eyes—and what's more, he hadn't shaved for days and he looked like he hadn't had a bite of food for months. Scruffy! Sort of half-starved and scruffy, carrying sandwich-boards. Nice people to go and mix up with! Well, nobody could never reproach *me* with nothing. I've always done my duty, Mr. Kasbek."

"I'm sure you have; and I can see that you have suffered."

"Now won't you have a cup o' tea? It's a pleasure to talk to somebody who can understand you. Other people, just because you don't go about crying, they think it's all honey. But I've been through it! But I've always done my duty,

thank God. I was faithful to Glawb in word and deed. I never let that man out of my sight for a minute. How many modern wives would do that for a man? I was always by his side. And look at the thanks I got! He run off with a pianist, a common girl—deserted me! Oh, you don't know what I've had to bear. Treated me like a dog! Like a *dog*! He said to my solicitors—in so many words, mind you; just like that—'Give her whatever she asks for,' he said, 'give her the thirty thousand in timber and oil shares,' he said, 'give her the five thousand a year,' he said, 'and don't let me ever see her again,' he said—and what had I done to deserve it? Nothing! Oh . . . oh . . ."

"Don't upset yourself. He's not worth it," said Kasbek.

"I'm only a woman after all . . ."

"True, true, only too true." Kasbek paused. He had patience.

"So Mogador sent you his cheque?" she said at length. "Hum. And now, I dare say, you want a cheque off of me."

"I want nothing, dear lady," said Kasbek, "but I merely remembered your promise to come in with us, if Mogador did. I do not urge you to do so. Now that it has become known that John Stone Mogador is giving his support, several ladies and gentlemen are anxious to invest."

"Mogador only did it to oblige Pasta Flava, because she was worrying him so much. What's a thousand to a man like Mogador? But it's a lot of money to me, Mr. Kasbek."

"Very well, Mrs. Glawb. If you feel at all dubious about it, it really is best not to invest. I shall not endeavour to persuade you by saying that a man like Mogador does not throw away thousands merely because people worry him. I leave it to your own acumen. You may say to yourself: 'Mogador is in the habit of throwing away money in crazy enterprises'; or you may say: 'Mogador is a great financier who holds the fortunes of thousands of people in his hands—what he touches prospers.' You may say either of these things. But it is not for me to urge you one way or another. I have come to you because Pasta Flava promised you the first refusal of a share

in the theatre. If you prefer not to take it, there is no harm done—somebody else will."

Kasbek rose, and looked for his hat; but Mrs. Glawb put out a detaining hand.

"Hoi, wait a minute, wait a minute, Mr. Kasbek! I haven't said no, have I? I just wanted to ask you, what do I get out of it?"

"One quarter of the total profits."

"And how much would that be?"

"Between eighty and one hundred pounds a week."

"What? How do you get that?"

"I have decided on premises, which we will alter to suit our purpose. We can put in about three hundred seats. The charge will hardly average less than about five shillings per seat. That makes at least four hundred pounds a week."

"But will you be able to get the people?"

"We have already a list of fifteen hundred members—and the membership fee is ten shillings a year."

"But Pasta Flava ain't fit to run a business——"

"My dear, good lady, I know it. The running of the theatre will be in my hands. I am experienced in this business."

"But all these here plays she wants to put on—all this foreign, highbrow stuff, with long names. The public don't want it. Why not put on a nice musical show—something like 'Oops-a-Daisy', or 'Knees Up'?"

"I will explain. In the first place, the cost of producing a musical comedy is immense. The cost of producing the plays we have in mind is very small. Again, while our plays have a purely intellectual appeal for the intelligentsia, they have a different kind of appeal for another section of the public. People like ourselves appreciate them. We enjoy them. We are aware that the good God has made life in various facets—the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the weak and the strong, the dark and the light. But other people will go to see a play merely because it is sordid, merely because it titivates their salacious tastes. We intend to specialise only in plays which have been banned by the Censor. This fact

alone gives them an unique appeal. The play with which we intend to open, *The Case of Heinrich Lobst*, has been banned in every civilised country on earth. Consider, therefore, its intellectual appeal! Consider, above all, how curious everyone is, to know what it is all about! It is a masterpiece. It is, I may say, Life Itself!"

"I see."

"To a lady of your intelligence, it is a pleasure to speak! You are not burdened with unnecessary reading. You speak the honest language of the country, without employing catchwords and clichés. While others talk, you observe and appreciate."

"I ain't altogether a uneducated woman. I like a bit of classic stuff as well as anybody. I mean, there's some women couldn't listen to anything but jazz and all that muck; but me, I could sit and listen to 'In a Monastery Garden', or 'Four Indian Love Lyrics' for hours on end! I don't look much, but I ain't altogether brainless."

"Far from it!"

"But don't get the impression that I'm a highbrow."

"No, no . . . Ah well, time goes, time goes. . . ." Kasbek looked at his watch.

"I want a proper agreement drawn up," said Mrs. Glawb.

"I have already had an agreement drawn up," said Kasbek, "here it is, signed and sealed. I took the liberty of doing so. I felt that a lady of your foresight could not very well fail to join us. Moreover, I remembered your promise." He took out a long envelope, and laid it before her.

"It's such a lot of money!" muttered Mrs. Glawb, reading the agreement.

"Oh, it is!" said Kasbek, "A minimum of eighty pounds a week, or four thousand pounds a year, for an indefinite period, in exchange for an initial outlay of one thousand pounds, is certainly a lot of money."

"I meant——"

"I do not urge you to come in."

"But . . . why is everything in Pasta Flava's name?"

"The name of the Flava family is good, Mrs. Glawb."

"Yes, I know; good enough for credit. Why not get some credit, to begin with?"

"We must start with a clean sheet."

"Well . . . well . . ."

Mrs. Glawb got her cheque-book. She filled in and signed the cheque. She was tormented by a fear that she was being swindled; but the prospect of enormous profits and quick returns was irresistible. Fortifying herself with the thought that John Stone Mogador was investing with her, she dried the cheque, and handed it to Kasbek.

He put the cheque in his wallet, and with resonant thanks and a guttural "Good morning", billowed out.

(2)

A little later, in the offices of Mr. Knippel, manufacturer of the "Ososoft" brand of tip-up theatre seats, Kasbek expanded. Knippel was a little, pot-bellied man, with a jerky intonation. Long association with theatrical people had embittered and disillusioned him, and given him bronchitis. But if his tone was offhanded—or even offensive—Kasbek could go one better. Kasbek could loom, an unscaleable precipice of grey flannel; he could grow dense and dark, a storm-cloud pregnant with thunder which he never needed to utter.

Kasbek became a monarch. He spoke no louder, but his thick, soporific voice took on a portentous drone. He did not slap the desk: he poised his right fist, as if about to bring it down with a heavy thud, so that Knippel winced in anticipation.

"Two hundred and fifty," said Kasbek.

"Two-fifty? Wodger mean, two-fifty? Eh? Eh? Chrm—chrm—ahem! A pahnd a seat's giving 'em away, I should live so sure. Hah! Wot next, I wonder? The moon 'e'll want next, I wouldn't be at all surstonished. A pahnd a seat; that's final. Foller me? Final, and done."

"Two hundred and fifty."

"Three 'undred."

"Not a farthing more than two-fifty!" Kasbek's fist oscillated, radiating suspense.

"Listen 'ere a minute—do me a favour, eh?—'it the desk, or don't 'it the desk; but don't keep on makin' aht like as if you was goin' to 'it the desk. You gimme nerves, d'you foller? Ahum—brohum—plerkher, ahem! Sorry if I splashed. All right, cut a long story short—two-eighty. Thirty-shilling seats you git, for under a pahnd a seat. What more d'you want?"

"Two hundred and fifty pounds."

"What a funny man you are! Why should you be like that? Eh? Eh? All over the country, so they're runnin' mad for my seats. Two seventy-five."

"Two hundred and fifty."

"All right, two-fifty. Prhum—hum—kh! Bronchitis. D'you want to sign the order now?"

"Yes, two months to pay."

"One month."

"Two."

"One."

"Two."

"All right. Six weeks."

"Two months is my last word."

"Al-ri-ight! Whas I arguin'? Shell I send the bill to Miss Flivver, or to you?"

"Flava."

"I said Flava. Kh! . . . Kh! . . . Kh! Phlegm. To her?"

"To me, care of Miss Flava. You can let me have some kind of formal statement now."

"Right. Miss Levy—statement for Mr. Kasbek, on be'alf of Miss Pasta Flava, 12 Manchester Crescent, Westminster—three 'undred Number 2 'Ososoft', for the Flava Theatre, two-fifty pahnds. Chrm—chrm—chrm!"

"Address all communications to me," said Kasbek, "I am in charge. I settle bills."

"A—kokh-kokh-kokh-kokh-kokh-kokh! Kh! Kh!" choked Knippel, blue in the face; and he added, in explanation: "Got a cough, foller me?"

Kasbek left the premises. On his way down the street, he stopped at a post-office, and bought a stamp. He ambled, with indescribable languor, to a writing-shelf; attached the stamp to the foot of the statement, and wrote, in neat round longhand:

*Received with thanks,
A. Knippel.*

Then he put the statement back in his pocket, with the slow meticulousity of the fussy old gentleman; and proceeded to the offices of Messrs. Raymond Rollo, Builders and Decorators.

At the corner of Grafton Street he gave a penny to a beggar. That is worthy of note. Out of four thousand two hundred pedestrians to pass a beggar at a busy corner, only one gives him a penny.

You see, therefore, that not everybody would have given away a penny like that.

(3)

At five o'clock Kasbek telephoned Pasta Flava.

"I have rung you in order to report progress," he said; "I have been on a tour. I have seen all the people, and arranged everything."

"Darling!"

"The seats, the curtains, and the other furniture are all bought. I have arranged for the structural alterations, the decorations, and the electric lighting. If I may be permitted to say so, I have set everything in motion. Soon, we will be ready to start."

"Kasbek, you're marvellous!"

"I have spent a great deal of money."

"Never mind, Kasbek. We'll make a lot more. My friends

shall never want for anything, Kasbek! Pasta Flava never forgets. I——”

“Hallo, are you there? It will, I fear, be necessary to let me have the remainder. It hurts me to put this to you. I would give much to be able to say to you: ‘Pasta Flava, my dear friend, let me do this for you out of the love that I bear you, and let me pay.’ But——”

“Hallo, Kasbek—darling—what do I care for money? It’s worth all the money in the world to me to have friends that love and respect me as you do. I have a thousand pounds to give you, but it’s all in shares. I’ve told my thingummy to sell them at once. Then I’ll hand the money to you.”

“If you would rather settle these bills yourself——”

“No, no! Darling, for God’s sake——”

“I have all the receipts here. I will render a precise account of all the money I have laid out——”

“But darling, I trust you! What is the use of anything, if we can’t love and trust one another?”

“Nevertheless——”

“Come and see me to-morrow. We’ll discuss things; all of us together. Yes?”

“I shall be very happy to see you at any time.”

“God bless you, Kasbek.”

“God bless *you*, Pasta Flava.”

Kasbek hung up the receiver. His throat was dry. He felt that he had earned a peaceful cup of coffee.

He made his way to Fidelio’s café; a quiet place, a smoky whispering-gallery of mild political conversation, in which there was no sound louder than the clack-clack of shuffled dominoes or the tapping of a pipe-bowl against a boot-heel.

Here, Kasbek relaxed. He lit an Egyptian cigarette, and settled down to a game of chess. He moved his pieces, drank his coffee, smoked his cigarette, and talked, all at the same time. . . .

“Yes, Mr. Harker, there are some people who play games for money. Of this, I must say, I do not approve. . . . Yes, gambling is bad. There is no law against it, but still it is bad.

. . . The laws of man are mutable, but above them stand the laws of God, and these, Mr. Harker, are immutable. I do not condemn gambling, but I cannot condone it. Who am I to condemn? Nobody. The instinct to gamble is deeply rooted and all instincts come from God. . . . Even evil instincts are sent to serve the purposes of the All Knowing; and these purposes are inscrutable. . . . Evil exists so that good may prevail. Even the Devil is merely a pawn in the hands of God, who is all-powerful. . . . Croupiers and bookmakers exist so that gamblers may work out their own salvation. . . . Check to your Queen. . . . It is unwise to condemn. We must recognise—I take your Queen—even evil men as means whereby one may attain salvation. . . . Check! . . . They are all agents of the Almighty, Mr. Harker. I trust you will forgive me, but I am compelled to call Checkmate.”

XV

MEN OF WAR



IF KASBEK was not actually the locomotive force dragging the Flava Theatre into being, he was, at least, the man who set the machinery in motion by means of unobtrusive but irresistible nudges and shoves. He instigated, dropping ideas as gentle hints. He pressed buttons and let loose energy. Having discovered a large, empty building near Long Acre, he expressed a conviction that God had designed it expressly for Pasta Flava's purpose; and gave the signal to the builders and decorators. A little army of artisans rushed to the place, and flung themselves at the walls and the ceilings in a frenzy of reconstruction.

Kasbek hung in dark corners, an affable shadow. If he uttered an order, it came in the form of a polite suggestion, which entered the mind as an idea rather than a series of words. Everybody did what he said, probably unaware of his presence. Pasta Flava, inarticulate with excitement, darted to and fro with the purposeless hurry of a blind gnat. Petroneli and Simson the Samson took off their coats, rolled up their sleeves and displayed forearms as massive as thighs, stamped their feet, spat on their hands with grim determination; and then sat on the floor and smoked. Futtercake, with the air of an overworked man, oscillated between the neighbouring public-house and the public urinal. As for Dita, she concentrated on a lump of putty: she rolled it into a ball, afflicted it with three deep holes and one prominent bump, pointed to it, and said: "A face." This effort occupied her time for several days.

But Colonel Bulba, intensely eager to help, balanced himself on a plank fifteen feet above the stage, and held a decorator's paint-brushes. The decorator, a morose man with a

damp moustache, slapped paint at the ceiling and smoked a black pipe. Now and again, he realised that Bulba was talking to him; and uttered a monosyllable.

"Uh."

"You may not have been there yourself, comrade in arms; but many other English soldiers have. Of course, the North of Russia is nothing, although the city of Petersburg is—was—an amusing place. Give me the South."

"Muh."

"Such landscapes! They stick on your memory like a paint on a wall. I do not know why. It has a monotony which hypnotises you—it pulls you towards it! One mile is like the next. Sometimes a quarry. Sometimes a claybank. Sometimes a pool, covered with green scum, green as a sour apple. I shut my eyes, and I can see it."

"You be'r not shut yer blinkin' eyes on this 'ere plank, mister, or you'll fall orf."

"Everything is so vast. Even the snow has a charm. It is only snow, and yet a city seems dull after that snow. Tell me, why? In the middle of that snow, you do not feel lonely. Here, there is nothing but loneliness. Why is that?"

"Unk."

"Perhaps it is because in one's own country one cannot be alone, because the earth, you understand, the earth which gives one life, that is one's friend and mother——"

"Gimme over that bottle o' turps."

"There it is. Or what is it? Who can say? Have you ever noticed, comrade in arms, how everything in life is black with mysteries? The way we behave is a mystery. Why do we go on living?"

"Gimme the yellor paint."

"I have read the philosophers a little. The will to live, in the Western mind, takes the form of a hallucination, known as hope. We live by delusion and perversity. We hope against what we know must be. And do you know what saves us?"

"Uh."

"The fact that we cannot look objectively upon life, that is

our salvation. Optimism, comrade in arms, unreasoning optimism; that is the fundamental human instinct. Otherwise, we could learn by other people's experience——"

"Gimme that brush."

"If we could learn by other people's experience, we should not hope any more. We all hope, however. Hope is a doubt. It amounts to this—'Well, after all, black may be white'—that is to say. The worst *may not* happen. The fact that we are incapable of really believing in that which we cannot see—that makes us capable of waiting for the future. All men believe in miracles. Otherwise——"

"Turps."

"Hope is unreasonable. It is, as you might say, folly. By folly we live!" Bulba waved his hands, and laughed.

"Don't shake the plank."

"Actually, my good friend, we have a great deal to thank God for. Especially for our foolishness we should thank God; because it keeps us cheerful. We should keep cheerful above all things—to keep one's humour and one's dignity, that is important. Do you believe in God?"

"Nah."

"No? Never mind. God, you see, is all-knowing. To know all is to forgive all, as the saying goes. He will excuse you. God is good. Life is long. Men are tough. Whatever happens to us, we get over it. It is not such a bad thing, to be alive; and it really is extremely difficult to die——"

And as if to demonstrate the truth of all this, Bulba incautiously stepped sideways, and fell off the plank.

He struck the stage with a crash that shook the building, rolled over and over, and lay on his back with outstretched arms. The decorator uttered a wild yell, and dropped a pot of paint. There was a brief hush—one unearthly moment of paralysis. Then everybody came running, throwing down hammers and saws.

Irene, coming in with Paula, called to Pasta Flava:

"Colonel Bulba's killed himself!"

Pasta Flava fainted out of hand, without a second's delay.

For once in her life, she was allowed to faint without let or hindrance. Irene and Paula broke into the group gathered about the recumbent Colonel.

"'E fell orf," said the decorator, in a shaky voice; and this statement was unanimously corroborated.

"Fell orf the plank."

"I 'ears a crash, an' I sees 'im drop, an' I ses to meself, Blimey, if 'e ain't gorn an' fell orf the plank!"

"'E 'it 'is 'ead."

"Broke 'is neck."

"I 'eard the bone go."

"'E's a goner, pore feller."

Kasbek, listening at Bulba's chest, held up a hand for silence, and then, in a whisper like the sound of rustling linen, said:

"His heart still beats."

"Poor man! Poor man!" said Irene, supporting Bulba's head on her knees.

Paula looked away. Then, overcome by curiosity, she ventured one rapid glance, shuddering in anticipation of blood and disfigurement. But Bulba's face was bloodless, grey and immobile. She looked more closely, with greater interest.

Unconsciousness had come suddenly enough to petrify on his lips a faint, rapt smile. He had the expression of a man who dies in a moment of exaltation. Such smiles are transitory; fixed, they have a terrifying finality—one associates them with the lofty peace of death. The anxiety and the weariness had been wiped out. His facial muscles, always rigid in dignity, had ceased to struggle with time and fatigue, and relaxed. His scars gave him an air of triumph. The sabre-slash, the broken nose, the gash of the glancing shrapnel, and the white cicatrice of the Japanese bullet, all seemed, somehow, to emphasise the absolute calm of his face.

"I think he *must* be dead," said Paula.

But even as she spoke, a shadow passed over Bulba's face; a flicker of the muscles. His lips came together, and the lines at the corners of his mouth grew deeper. His eyebrows

contracted. His eyes opened. He stared at Paula for a moment, and then sat up.

"My dear Colonel, what a terrible accident!" said Kasbek. "Are you badly hurt?"

"I think not," said Bulba, feeling at his back.

"Blimey, mister, you didn't arf come a smacker!" exclaimed the decorator.

"No, it is nothing," said Bulba, cautiously investigating his ribs with the palms of his hands, "No, nothing."

"Extraordinary escape!" said Kasbek.

"I am very fortunate," said Bulba, rising to his feet without much effort; and, turning to the workmen, he shouted, in a voice that made them jump: "Back to work, all you men!"

Pasta Flava came out of her swoon, and attracted attention by bursting into a prolonged wail:

"My friend! He was my friend! I loved him, and he loved me—yes, he even loved poor old ugly Pasta Flava! He was my best and most faithful friend, and I treated him like a dog! Like a dog! Oh, Bulb——"

"Forgive me if I alarmed you," said Bulba, fishing from his waistcoat-pocket an indescribably crumpled cigarette.

"What?" cried Pasta Flava, "I thought you were hurt."

"Just a little fall, madame."

"Then damn you, what do you mean by it? How dare you? How dare you? You frightened me! See how my hands are shaking! You——"

"But——"

"Shut up. You don't know what I have to suffer, and you don't care! You only worry and frighten me. Bulba, how could you? How *could* you, Bulba? Well, why don't you say something?"

"It was——"

"Don't dare to answer me back! Don't dare to presume upon my love, and try and kick me when I'm down! All you do is sneer—and me lying on the floor in a dead faint—and you don't even ask me if I feel better! Oh——"

"I hope——"

"Oh shut up! Be quiet, just for a *minute*; and don't keep on!"

Bulba shrugged his shoulders, and began to shake his coat. He withdrew into a dark corner, in order to conceal the tattered lining. Five minutes later, Pasta Flava approached him, and patted his cheek.

"Darling," she said, "don't worry. Don't take it to heart. I forgive you. You didn't mean to upset me. Accept my forgiveness." She kissed him on the forehead. "And now let me introduce you to a friend, Miss Paula Barker—she's a friend of Irene's; and Irene suffered and starved for me, yes, for poor old Pasta Flava, because she loves me, and because I love her; so you must be kind to her, Bulba. Look after Paula as you would look after your own sister."

Pasta Flava rushed away. Paula smiled. Bulba stared.

"It is very curious," he said, "but I have an impression that I have seen your face in a dream."

"Not really?"

"Yes; but of course, now I remember. I saw your face just now, when I was recovering from that little fall. I saw you, and wondered who you were. Then I got up, and didn't see you, and so it seemed to me that I must have dreamt it."

"You really must have hurt yourself."

"Not in the least."

"You only say that."

"No. It is best not to take too much notice of little hurts."

"But it's not so easy."

"Not easy, not difficult. You become conditioned to little hurts. A cook is accustomed to holding hot saucepans. At first it hurts; then her hands adjust themselves to the heat. It is the same with every part of you."

Tough guy! thought Paula. She shed some of the enigma from her expression, and added a little of that facial contortion which expressed deep admiration.

"You must have suffered a great deal, to be so indifferent."

"It is very curious. I cannot yet associate you with reality,"

said Bulba, ignoring her last remark; "You are a kind of solid dream."

A little more modesty, eh? You're tough, are you, you great big martyr? Well, we'll see about that—"Yes, it is strange."

"I am reminded of a similar incident, in Rostov—but I'll tell you some other time."

"Why not now?" asked Paula. She gazed into his eyes, as if she found it impossible to look away. Her voice became gentle. It rose and fell in soft, sad cadences, full of that remote, ineradicable melancholy which is blood and wine to the soul of the Slav. "I should love to hear."

"It is too long to tell now," said Bulba.

"A lot of things must have happened to you. I should love to hear about them."

"I think I would rather listen to you; you have such a voice. But perhaps . . . I might hope for an opportunity to . . . have some further conversation with you?"

"Why not? I should be delighted! I shall be seeing you here again, I hope?"

"I shall always be here."

"Then I'll be here, too. Excuse me now, won't you?"

And Paula went away, while Bulba stood, foolishly gaping. From some remote cavern in the depths of his soul, the vampirish ghosts of emotions that belonged to the dead past flew up to attack him. He looked down at his unshapely clothes, passed a hand over his ruffled hair, and muttered:

"I am old and ugly enough to know better, *chort vozmi!*"

He picked up a two-pound hammer, and began to knock entirely unnecessary nails into the floor, striking with all his strength.

"Old — and — ugly — enough — to — know — better — *chort—voz—mi!*"

Bang!—Bang!—Bang!—Bang!—Bang!

(2)

And at midnight, Colonel Volodia Bulba, lean, ravaged, harrowed, scarred, bruised, battered, hacked, shot, stabbed, poisoned, blown up, blown down, blown backward, forward, and sideways, kicked by horses, scratched by women, bitten by dogs, and scorned by men; survivor of a hundred humiliations; undaunted wearer of innumerable ancient wounds in body and soul—Colonel Bulba, old and ugly enough to know better, *chort vozmi*—walked from the Thames to Trafalgar Square, communing with his soul. His suit was barely presentable; it bagged at the elbows and knees, and ran to fringe at the wrists and ankles. His hat, undermined by the rains of seven winters, and the sweat of seven summers, tended to collapse: only the even pressure of his skull kept it in the form of a hat—and even then, it was recognisable as such only because it was on his head. He carried an ebony cane with a silver knob, and looked as if he had just stolen it.

In a sky of indigo, the full moon hung like a bubble. Stripped of pretence, the government offices were naked white tombs in the moonlight—abodes of moonshine, mice, hollow echoes, and dry dust.

“Idiocy,” said Bulba to himself, “it is nothing more than blank idiocy, and may the Devil take it. Bulba, Bulba, Bulba. You are an idiot. You are an old idiot. He who commits no follies at twenty will commit them at forty, as the saying goes. Very well! But at twenty you committed enough follies for ten Cossacks. And now you are fifty! Fifty, Devil take it! You are a fool. Have you not had enough of folly yet? At nineteen you fall in love with your uncle’s wife. At fifty, you talk philosophy on a plank, and fall——”

He passed the Cenotaph; paused to salute solemnly, and said: “The glorious dead.”

A policeman, stamping past on heels as solid as tree-stumps, regarded him with suspicion. Bulba gave him a freezing look, and resumed his inward soliloquy:

"You may well stare. I suppose you think I'm a tramp. Get out of it! The glorious dead. Only the dead are glorious, and you, Mister Bulba, you are merely a fool. You talk philosophy on a plank, and you fall over, and you cast your eyes on a dream. In this there is no rhyme or reason, as the saying goes. At twenty, yes. At thirty, or even forty—yes. But at fifty! *Ekh!*"

He felt in all his waistcoat pockets, but could find no cigarettes. He fumbled for money, and pulled out his entire fortune—threepence. He stopped at a coffee-stall, and bought five cigarettes for twopence; lit one, and walked on. Trafalgar Square opened before him like a huge grey mouth. Northumberland Avenue purred at him. The Strand howled at him, and spat from its gullet a little screaming car which missed him by six inches.

"Love is all very well for young people, or for rich people. To the young, it comes. To the rich, it may be driven. But to you, my friend! Bah! Moreover, you are a fool. You imagine things. You are a dreamer of dreams. You take it into your head to fall in love with a dream. Didn't that Siberian horse kick some sense into you? Or did that Turkestan sabre let out what brains you possessed? Ass. She looks upon you as a doddering old man. In all probability she writes stories for ladies' magazines, and wants a character. Go on! Make a fool of yourself! Plunge your hand into your breast, and say: 'Here, Miss, is my heart!' And then read a little article in the Sunday papers: *Crazy Russian Veteran Offers Marriage to our Special Correspondent*. Or say: 'Young lady, I am old enough to be your father. Will you marry me?' And be rewarded with a giggle. And rightly so. Bulba, you are an idiot. Bulba, Bulba, Bulba; you are an idiot! What right have you to think of such things? None at all. You are not even fit to present to a bank-clerk. Only bohemians or tramps would tolerate you."

A thin boy whispered in his ear:

"Giss a penny to get a cup o' tea!"

"There," said Bulba, handing over his last penny, "wealth is often a curse, anyway."

He paused at a cheap and showy restaurant, blazing red-hot with neon tubes. A writhing, waving ring of vivid emerald encircled a purple-black lobster. A magnificent metallic salmon of osmium, hammered antimony, copper and blood, smiled a wide, vacuous smile in an oscillating halo of incandescent turquoise.

"Not to-night, my dear," said Bulba to himself. "Some other time, my beloved friend. Well, why not, some other time? To-night you smoke Woodbines at five for twopence, but to-morrow, you inhale the finest productions of Bostanjoglo, or whoever it is nowadays. To-night you are sleeping God knows where, but to-morrow you may sleep—God knows where! Be thankful that the weather is warm. Anything is possible. Pretty little salmon, smile while you can, for to-morrow Bulba may eat you with a mayonnaise! Hah! Laugh, salmon! To-morrow I may have the laugh of you. Remember Irkutsk seemed to be the end of all things—but here I am! Hai, Bulba, you may be starving, but it is a triumph that you are alive to appreciate the sensation!"

It is a deplorable fact that, when you are hungry, the dull eyes of a salmon are more beautiful than the eyes of Joan Crawford; the smell of boiled cabbage is more sweet than the subtlest production of Molyneux; cauliflowers are blossoms of pure white jade, Spanish onions are witch-balls of exquisitely striated mica, and turnips have such a nacreous beauty that they almost shine in the dark. In the starved organism, the thought of food becomes obtrusive. It is remarkable, therefore, that between Bulba's eyes and that glaring window-full of displayed food, there rose a vision of Paula's gold-and-ivory head, obscuring everything else.

"She is a dream, that girl. To come out of unconsciousness, and to see such a face—no, that is a little too much! All right! Let it be a dream. Lesser men than you, my little Bulba, have grasped dreams. It is a known fact that not all girls like young men. There are some kinds of ugliness which

women love. Idiot, have you ever given up hope before, that you should despair now? To every man there comes some kind of happiness. Why not? It is only fair."

He walked on. A man passed him, walking blindly; a tall, fair man of athletic build, with black misery in his face. His eyes were red, as if with weeping.

This man was Tito Barbo, the boxer.

"There goes hopelessness and despair. And he is so young! Never despair, my poor young friend; God is with you. He understands. If you have committed a crime, He will excuse you. If you are disappointed—don't worry! If life strikes you from the back, turn and kick it in the belly!"

He turned back. The last of the night-birds drifted past—tired musicians; dreary revellers reeling in the foggy nausea of stale debauch; the ashes, the dust, the debris of the population.

The moon still soared, superb and immaculate.

"The glorious dead," said Bulba, saluting the Cenotaph for the second time.

He reached Westminster Bridge, and looked down into the gleaming black river. Big Ben struck two. The huge, shaking clangour of its mighty bells reverberated over the water.

Bulba felt full of inspiration.

He took out an envelope, and the stump of a pencil, and wrote as follows:

*Oh grey and eternal river!
Oh golden domes of . . .*

But at this point, his muse dried up. He put the paper and pencil back into his pocket, and went on.

Three o'clock found him on the Embankment. Sharing a seat with an aged man wrapped in newspapers, Bulba talked, keeping as far away as possible, for fear of vermin:

"Now I have read the philosophers a little. The will to live, in the Western mind, takes the form of a hallucination known as hope. We live by delusion and perversity. We hope

against what we know must be. And do you know what saves us?"

"I dower know!"

"The fact that we cannot look objectively upon life, that is our salvation. Optimism, grand-dad, unreasoning optimism; that is the fundamental human——"

"Khoooooor! . . . Khoooooor! . . . Khoooooor!"

The other man snored.

XVI

BARBO



THROUGH the shuffle and the mutter of a waiting multitude, advice was poured into Barbo's ears in an urgent whisper:

"It's your right that'll do it. Don't forget—he can't guard against a right hook. It's his weakness, get me? You got to beat him—it's your one chance. You can do it. Only, by God, it's lucky for you Kraut ain't Haggerty, after the way you been neglectin' yourself, hangin' round with that blonde——"

"*Basta!*"

"Well, remember!"

Barbo put on his dressing-gown. He saw the immense grey auditorium, stippled with the pink dots of five thousand faces; the spear-heads of the starched shirt-fronts in the ring-side seats; the spotless sweaters of the seconds. The immense domed roof of the place was lost in shadow. Out of this shadow hung megaphone-shaped shades which spouted hard cones of paralysing light. Everything seemed to emit noise. Even the lights made a buzzing sound—the unimaginably rapid sputtering and crepitation of leaping arcs and disintegrating white-hot carbons. Five thousand men and women were drunk with uproar. Their voices merged in an endless, maniacal yell, rising and falling in a kind of screaming vocal switchback—beating in waves—pouring in cataracts—whirling in nightmarish voices——

Yaa-AH-ahahahah——

Expanding and contracting, like a huge heart—heaving up, thrusting forward, and expanding, with the sound of a cosmic eruption——

Oooooooooaaaaa!

Diminishing, hoarsening, blurring with a constant breathy undertone——

Heeeeh—heeeehh—heeeehhh——

Softening; parting, and leaving an aperture through which the sharp voice of the referee plunged immediately:

“Seconds out the ring! Time!”

Ping!

Barbo and Kraut met in mid-ring, and the fight started.

For the moment, Barbo forgot Paula, and thought of nothing but his opponent. He moved forward, his body undulating, his hands hovering. Kraut crouched, looking up at him; his face wore that expression of tense trepidation peculiar to Jewish boxers. The crowd became suddenly quiet; its voice died to a kind of wordless whisper.

Barbo leapt to the attack; his left hand flicked a jab to Kraut's head. Kraut advanced, with lowered head, ducking, feinting, waving his hands. He seemed to be saying: “Which will you have? Left? Right?”

Barbo danced away, but Kraut followed, still waving his hands in that ominous, hypnotic alternation . . .

“Left? . . . Right? . . . Left? . . . Right? . . . Left? . . . Right?—*Right!*”

The punch, a right hook, glanced off Barbo's chin. He was aware of the impact; and then it seemed to him that his brain had suddenly sprouted soft mildew, which filled his skull. He was confused. He saw Kraut rushing at him, as it were, on waves of pink fog? Then he was fighting automatically. His right hand jarred against Kraut's forehead. Then, as if a wind had blown away the fog, everything became photographically clear. He felt the surge of a wild elation; instantaneously planned his tactics for the next five seconds—drove a rapid upper-cut between Kraut's oscillating hands, and swung at his unguarded ribs. Kraut gasped. Barbo laughed with exaltation. He was light, with an unearthly lightness. Kraut's arms appeared to move with the deliberate slowness of cumbersome machinery; he staggered back. Barbo pounced upon him. Kraut seemed incapable of resistance—a punching-

ball. He retreated to the ropes, crouched again, waving and swaying; ignored two short-arm punches to the face; lashed out with his left hand, and snarled, showing his teeth.

Barbo took the blow on his left arm, and felt the immense power behind it. Kraut bounded forward, manœuvring for one of his famous knock-down body-punches—feinted, exposing his jaw to Barbo's right—parried the inevitable punch with his left arm, and landed one powerful blow, as rapid as a dagger-thrust, just above his opponent's belt-line.

The crowd roared as the gong sounded.

Barbo went back to his corner. He felt that Kraut had knocked something out of him. To his horror, he discovered that he had no desire to fight any more. He sat on his stool, staring dully at the seconds, who kneaded at his arms and stomach.

"What's up with you, Tito? What you looking like that for?"

"Why don't you wake up? What's become of your right?"

"God, you're asking for trouble if you don't wake up! Kraut's dead hot. If you don't keep your mind on the fight——"

"For Christ's sake, Tito, snap into it!"

"Wake up!"

"It's that blonde bird."

A voice in Barbo's brain said, with dull and dreadful acquiescence:

"Quite right. Paula knocked the fight out of me. All right. I shall lose. Who cares?"

Ping!

Barbo and Kraut met, like colliding vehicles. Barbo's flickering limbs, falling automatically into the routine of the fight, kept him out of harm's way. He was on ancient and familiar ground. He responded mechanically to Kraut's gambits; avoided punches, delivered punches, and bounded away on his dancing feet. The crowd disapproved of this. It wanted blood. It uttered deep, dissatisfied roars:

Woor—Gwoooooer—Yeeeeer!

Kraut, however, had observed Barbo's curious preoccupation. He adopted subtler tactics. He retreated. He cowered. He allowed Barbo to pursue him, almost to a corner. Then, suddenly, he rebounded from the ropes, punching with both hands.

Barbo reeled back. Blood trickled from a cut above his right eye, and from the corner of his mouth. He recovered, landed a right hook to Kraut's chin, and fell into a clinch. The blood from his injured eye reddened his face, like war-paint. He held Kraut to him with his left hand, while his right jabbed venomously at his head.

"Break!" said the referee——

Ping!

Barbo found two hard objects lying on his tongue. They were teeth. He looked furtively across the ring. Kraut was watching him closely, from his corner. Barbo hesitated; balanced the teeth on the back of his tongue, and then swallowed them, with a wry grin.

But the dull little voice in his brain persisted:

"See what you done to me, Paula? See? What did you want to do this to me for? Why did you kid me you loved me? I wouldn't do a thing like that to my worst enemy. I never did you any harm. I loved you. I loved you so much I would have let you spit on me. I would have let you insult my mother. I would have given you every penny. And look at what you done to me——"

Somebody bellowed:

"A pahnd to a penny the Dago goes aht in the next two rahnds!"

Ping!

The voice of the crowd was guttural, wide-mouthed, and full of ferocious enjoyment.

Kraut bunched himself together, and hurled himself to the assault.

Barbo swallowed another mouthful of blood.

(2)

On this same evening, Paula sat with Colonel Bulba in the Grotto. She had placed her feet within reach of Bulba's. She had arranged herself in an attitude of deep attentiveness. Her mouth was round with compassion. Drooping lids and long black lashes veiled her eyes. She listened, while Bulba talked.

"That was in the year 1920. It took me two years to work my way from Vladivostok to the Eastern part of Europe. I arrived in Budapest. Do not ask me how I got there—I myself, I hardly know. I found my sister there."

"Your sister?"

"Yes, Olga, my sister. I had thought that she was dead. I had hoped that she was dead. She was in Petersburg, when the mob broke loose, you understand; and she was much younger than I, and quite beautiful. She rather resembled my mother. I met her by chance. I was in a post-office. I saw a woman struggling with a heavy parcel. I said to her—'Madame, permit me to have the honour'; and imagine my astonishment, when I saw that she was my sister! It is a very curious thing. She regarded me much as I regarded you—as an angel—that is to say, as a kind of dream. You must understand that she was ill at the time. She thought that I was a spirit, sent to call her to her heavenly home, as the saying goes. . . ." Bulba's eyes filled with tears. "You perceive that it was a pathetic thing! She was very ill. To be quite frank, she had a bad chest. I made her go home to bed, and then looked about the city for work. It was my duty, eh? Well, that was the first time I humbled myself. I begged for work, all round the city. The time comes when every man has to eat his pride, *chort vozmi!* In the end, do you know what I did? I pulled my hat well down over my eyes, and turned up my collar to hide my face, and I stood in the gutter—and sang!"

A twinge of pain passed over Paula's face. She pressed his hand, in sympathy.

"I have a voice like a crow," said Bulba.

"Please go on."

"But I want you to understand, Miss Paula, that for myself, I would never have done such a thing."

"I'm sure of that."

"It turned out to be all right, in the end. She recovered. She married a Swedish gentleman called Mansen. She lives in Sweden, and has a son, mark you, whom she calls Volodia—after me! You see? When all is said and done, I am very lucky. Things might have been far worse than that, what the devil! I——"

The proprietor of the café tuned in the radio. The voice of an announcer boomed out, superimposed upon an unbroken undertone of half-eliminated crowd-noises:

"Now! Kraut is back into form! He's going for Barbo with both hands! Kraut swings to head—Barbo side-steps—oh, lovely, sir! Barbo lands a beauty to the heart—oh, and another to the jaw—no, it missed. Kraut scores again; a beautiful right hook to the stomach—and again. Kraut is boxing beautifully to-night. Barbo seems to have lost——"

A roar like a thunderstorm drowned his voice for a second; then it struggled out of that overwhelming volume of sound, like a fly struggling out of a pond, and again made itself audible:

"Barbo scored a beauty! Kraut is down! A straight right to the jaw. One—Two—Three—Kraut's on his knees—he's up! Oh! Magnif——"

"——Magnificent! Kraut landed two of the finest punches I've ever seen—a right to the heart, and a left upper-cut to the jaw! Barbo staggers. He recovers. No! Kraut's after him now! Hear the punches——"

Smack! Smack-smack! Smack!

"——Kraut landed another right to the body—a terrible body-puncher, Kraut! Barbo's down at last! One—Two—Three—Four—Five—Six—Seven——"

Ping!

"Ah. Yes. I think the bell saved Barbo that time——"

"Tell him to switch that off," said Paula, "it bores me to tears. I'd much rather listen to you."

"Boxing is a barbarous sport," said Bulba, "Oh, Signor—would you be so kind as to find some other station? Made-moiselle finds this distasteful."

"Sure, sure!"

The dial turned. The loud-speaker emitted a hair-raising squeak. Another voice emerged:

"—have just heard Ray Pipe and his band broadcasting from the Belgravia Hotel. Miss Totty Jerusalem will now sing 'Hootchie-pap' . . ."

(3)

In his corner, Barbo strove against oblivion. Kraut's body-punches seemed to have displaced every vital part. His stomach was in his throat; his heart filled his chest; his lungs seemed to have ceased to function; the hands of his seconds, massaging his bruised body, made him want to cry out. Their fingers were too cold and sharp—they tore at him like the black talons of Death. The flapping of the towel felt like the breath of a high wind.

"Tito! Listen! What's come over you? You're boxing, but you ain't *fighting*! Did that blonde bird knock the guts out of you that much? God! Listen, Tito—you *got* to win! Ain't you listening to me? Tito! Barbo! I——"

The voice inside Barbo's head droned on, in a dreary monotone of defeat:

"If you hadn't have treated me like you did, Paula, I could have done anything—I would have had something to fight for. But now, I don't care if I win or lose, or live or die, or anything."

The bell rang again.

Barbo leapt up, with desperate energy. As Kraut hooked again at his stomach, he was overcome with rage and went mad for a few seconds. He dashed at Kraut, and beat him to the ropes, poised his right hand, and struck at Kraut's jaw.

Kraut jerked backwards, as if somebody had lassoed him from behind; he sank to his knees, groping feebly at the floor.

Barbo's anger passed. It gave place to a feeling of lassitude, a craving for privacy. He wanted to sit down alone, and do nothing but think. Kraut did not interest him. The great, roaring crowd was hostile to him. He was tired, a man with a broken heart, alone in a crowd of five thousand; and they were all shouting at him, so that his ears tingled. . . ."

"See, Paula! if you'd been watching me, I could have knocked Kraut through the roof. . . . But who *cares*?

He perceived that Kraut had risen, and had slipped away. His bruised, menacing face appeared to the right; Barbo caught a glimpse of it out of the corner of his eye. He swerved to face him.

Then the hall fell over. Barbo could distinctly hear the crash of its fall, and the intolerable baying of a crowd. The scene had changed. There were no more faces, and no more ropes—only a shadow, an immense shadow, shaped like a dome, in which there hung blinding, sizzling cones of light; and beyond, the vague outline of steel framework.

"Seven!" said the referee.

Barbo realised that he was lying on his back, staring upwards.

"Eight!"

"I can't lie here like this!" Barbo told himself, "I must get up . . . and fight . . ." He struggled to his knees. He tried to force himself upward. His legs failed. His knees and elbows gave way. . . .

Mentally, he addressed a last reproach to a dissolving vision of Paula:

"Look at what you done to me!"

He grovelled on the canvas. For a brief instant, he tasted all the bitterness of defeat. Tears gushed from his bruised eyes. He heard the final exultant yell of the crowd, an ear-splitting ululation, expressive of bestial delight, sweeping up and down in one nauseating glissando——

And that was the end of Tito Barbo.

“THE CASE OF HEINRICH LOBST”



“SINCE the production of this play is in my hands,” said Kasbek, “I should be glad if you would follow me very carefully while I go through the synopsis of it. Of course, it must be clearly understood that only one or two of us are suitable for the rôles of central characters. There are several characters who play very important parts. There is, first and foremost, Heinrich Lobst, a waiter in the Imperial Palace Restaurant. He is thin and nervous; masochistic; a sufferer from flatulence. The play is the tragedy of his life. He is followed, throughout the play, by Fate—a symbolical figure, hooded and carrying a lantern. For Heinrich Lobst, we need a sensitive and intelligent actor. Fate, however, says nothing. It merely walks after Heinrich Lobst, carrying its lantern, and uttering only a few ironic laughs or savage growls. It seems to me that our friend and fellow-artist Petroneli would be admirably suited to this part.”

“Go on,” said Pasta Flava.

“Then there is Fanny Grabe, a dish-washer,” said Kasbek, “a thin, pale woman of unearthly beauty. She loves Death.”

“I thought I might do for that part; but I don’t love Death,” said Pasta Flava. “Still, darling, I might try——”

“Then comes the Princess von Leibeshohle, a peerless beauty who rejoices in inflicting injuries on her fellow-creatures.”

“People call *me* cruel,” said Pasta Flava.

“Then, the Baron Hickoff, an alcoholic. He drinks and drinks, but can find nothing strong enough for him.”

“Futtercake!” cried Pasta Flava.

“Friends, Romans, Countrymen!” said Futtercake.

“Important parts are also played by Yak, the head-waiter, a

repressed sadist; by a diseased beggar-woman, Gissa Schilling; by a harlot, Naima Preiss, who is, incidentally, addicted to heroin; by an unburied corpse; and by a man who lives on the immoral earnings of Naima Preiss. These parts, I repeat, must be played by actors and actresses of talent and experience. Otherwise, the entire purpose of the play will be lost. A false move may result in a ridiculous fiasco.”

“So you mean to say we’ve just got to sit still and look on!” said Mrs. Glawb, truculently.

“No, madame. There are minor parts—Prostitutes, Cretins, Perverts, Drunkards, a Nymphomaniac, and a Psychologist; so none of you will be left out.”

“What’s the play about, anyway?” asked Mrs. Glawb.

“Madame, it is a play with a purpose. It demonstrates, primarily, that nobody can be blamed for anything. It is poignant—full of scenes which touch the heart—a masterpiece of the utmost humanitarianism, which pleads for deeper tolerance, and wider understanding. We are too intolerant. We fail to see from the point of view of the other man. *Heinrich Lobst*—I quote the Preface—was meant to help us see the truth. It is a symbolic drama. It shows how bitter is our need for sympathy and kindness. The characters reveal themselves, one by one. Superficially, they may seem unpleasant; but in actual fact, they only appear so because they are misunderstood. The play begins with the final scene, and then goes on to explain the reasons leading up to it. Thus, it ends at the beginning.”

“Is that necessary?” asked Bulba.

“My dear Colonel! Many things in life are incomprehensible. Is that so?”

“It is.”

“We see something happen. It seems illogical, insane.”

“True.”

“Yet if we know the circumstances that have preceded it, it is no longer illogical. Hence, the play opens with a scene which appears to be wild to the verge of insanity. Then we go back, step by step, to explain it; and thus, at the close of the

play, as the curtain descends, everything is clear, and we say to ourselves: 'How easy it is to misunderstand! And yet how easy it is to comprehend!' I quote the Preface."

"Hm."

"In the opening scene, almost all the characters are assembled. There is part of the Imperial Palace Restaurant, part of the Doss-house, and part of the Brothel, all on one stage."

"Why all on one stage?"

"Because it says so in the book."

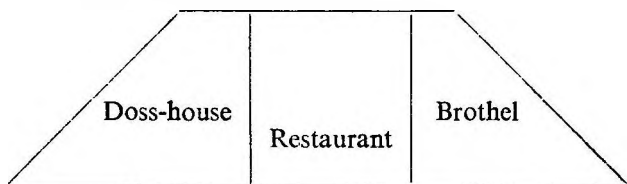
"But doesn't that cause a great deal of confusion?"

"It does, my dear Colonel, it does. But that is intentional, because—as it says in the Preface—Life is like that. It is a terrific scene—stark and powerful. But careful handling is essential, otherwise it degenerates into a mere hullabaloo. First of all comes the fight-scene in the restaurant. Then, like parts in a round-song, or a fugue, come the murder in the Doss-house and the raid on the brothel, within ten minutes of each other. It ends in uproar. The audience is compelled to use its intelligence in order to separate the scene into its integral parts and still preserve the simultaneousness of it."

"It seems very complicated," said Bulba.

"It is, somewhat. But, as the Preface so aptly puts it, Life itself is complicated; and this play helps one to understand the chaos of Life"—Kasbek laid great emphasis on the first letter of this word, pronouncing it *Er*life—"So. This is the opening scene. In the middle, seated at a table beneath a superb chandelier, is the Princess, accompanied by the Baron Hickoff, and three Noblemen. This, we are given to understand, is a momentous occasion. Heinrich Lobst moves about, waiting at the table. To their left is the Doss-house—a squalid heap of verminous bedding; four repulsive down-and-outs playing dice by the light of a candle stuck in a bottle. To the right, the lounge of a house of ill-fame; gilding and plush; three painted women drinking champagne with three men—one thin, one fat and one with a beard. To simplify it, permit me to draw you a diagram——"

Taking out a fountain-pen, Kasbek drew a trapezium, divided it into three sections, and, with hastily-scribbled notes, made the arrangement clear:



“Of course, you understand that there are no dividing partitions. Now the action and dialogue commence in the middle section. The Princess is in a capricious mood. She torments everybody, and Heinrich Lobst most of all. She deliberately spills her soup, in order to blame him. She throws cutlery to the floor, so that he may have the trouble of renewing it. She breaks a plate, calls the manager, and denounces Heinrich for breaking it. She wilfully soils the shoulder of her dress with grease, and then threatens to sue the management for the value of the dress. Her companions roar with laughter. Heinrich burns with indignation. Then he retaliates. He is serving an entrée. He stands near the Princess, and passes wind with the noise of a trumpet—turns, with the rapidity of lightning, and exclaims, in a reproachful voice: ‘Now I suppose your Highness will say I did that, too!’ She rises, screaming: ‘So you did—I didn’t do it!’ Everybody laughs; and that is how the fight starts.

“Meanwhile, in the Doss-house, the game of dice turns into a quarrel. The First Mendicant, the First Blind Man, and the Second Organ-Grinder engage in a fight. The Second Mendicant, the Second Blind Man, and the First Organ-Grinder, try to pull them apart. Finally, they all turn on the Cripple, and beat him with his crutches. Fanny Grabe emerges from a pile of bedding, and cries: ‘Death! Death! Beautiful Death!—I feel your black presence!’ The Cripple dies. Fanny throws herself upon him, saying: ‘I hated you living, but now I love you because you are dead—but speak to me,

why don't you speak to me?" And to demonstrate the eternal and beautiful recurrence of Life, Gissa Schilling crawls from a corner, holding up a baby to which she has just given birth.

"And simultaneously, the Brothel scene reaches its conclusion. The First Harlot is drugging the wine of the Fat Man. The Second Harlot is striking the Thin Man on the head with a bottle, while he shouts: 'Hit harder! Hit harder! It's so pleasant when you leave off!' And Naima Preiss, stupefied with drugs and drink, goes down on her hands and knees, and miaouws like a cat.

"It finishes on a high note. Fate utters a wild laugh. The Baron Hickoff stabs Heinrich to the heart. The police burst into the Brothel. Darkness and tumult reign in the Doss-house, and the scene ends with an impassioned cry from all the players: 'Understand us! Pity us!'

"Then, of course, the subsequent five acts of the play deal with the causes."

"It sounds very violent," said Bulba.

"It is a powerful piece of work," said Kasbek.

Pasta Flava was breathless with emotion.

"Now tell us, Kasbek, what parts are we going to play? I want to be the Princess. I want Bulba to be Heinrich. I want——"

"But my dear friend——"

"Kasbek, why *must* you argue? Am I or am I not going to be the Princess?"

"Very well," said Kasbek.

"I want Bulba to be Heinrich."

"Very well."

"Petroneli can be Fate, if he likes."

"Very well."

"Futtercake must be the Baron!"

"As you wish."

"Dita must be Fanny Grabe."

Kasbek shrugged and nodded.

"Simson can sort of help to carry things about, unless—we couldn't have two Fates, I suppose?"

“No, one would be ample.”

“Ah, well. Mrs. Glawb can be a prostitute.”

“Thank you for nothink! You can be a prostitute,” said Mrs. Glawb, “I’m going to be the Princess!”

“The part of Gissa Schilling would require extraordinary talent,” said Kasbek.

“Then I’ll be Gissa Schilling,” said Mrs. Glawb.

“No, you be the Princess; *I* will be Gissa Schilling,” said Pasta Flava.

“Superior beauty, however, is necessary for the part of the Princess,” murmured Kasbek.

“Then I’ll be the Princess,” said Pasta Flava and Mrs. Glawb in one voice.

“Whether beauty is superior to talent, that is a debatable point,” said Kasbek.

At this, they hesitated. Then Pasta Flava was overcome with generosity.

“Darling, I don’t mind,” she said, “you can be the Princess, if you like.”

“Oh, can I? Are you trying to insinuate that I’ve got no talent?” replied Mrs. Glawb.

“All right, you can be Gissa Schilling.”

“Hum! Very kind of you, I don’t think!”

“Well, darling, please yourself. Who would you like to be?”

“I’ll be the Princess,” said Mrs. Glawb.

“Very well, darling; I’ll be Gissa Schilling.”

“No. On second thoughts, I’ll be Gissa Schilling,” said Mrs. Glawb.

“Ahem! Pray forgive me!” said Kasbek with irony, “but I was under the impression that I was producing this play!”

“Of course I forgive you, darling! Say no more about it; we all make mistakes!” cried Pasta Flava, “This is *my* theatre; the Flava Theatre. *The Case of Heinrich Lobst*; featuring Pasta Flava. The Princess Leibeshohle—Pasta Flava. Produced by Pasta Flava. Darling! Can’t you see? Can’t you see what a masterpiece this is going to be?”

XVIII
EDNA



SUNDAY brought heat. Summer had hovered for weeks; now, it burst over England. People desired only to escape from the cities; to wallow, naked, with outstretched limbs, in sea, grass, sand, and daylight. "Air!" they cried, "Air! We are suffocating!"—and poured into the surrounding countryside.

Edna Barker came into the shop-parlour, dressed in khaki knickers, a shirt with an open collar, and thick walking-shoes. Her plump arms and legs had a conspicuous whiteness. She looked about her with uneasy defiance. Paula burst into melodious laughter.

"Well, what's the joke?" asked Edna.

"Oh—ho-ho-hoh my *dear*!"

"Well, what?"

"You're not going out like that!"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"No, but don't be silly, Edna; you can't walk along the street in that get-up!"

"*Why* can't I?" cried Edna, with rising anger. "I don't see anything to laugh at."

"Those shorts! They don't seem to fit you properly. They're too tight across the bottom—you can sort of see where it goes in. And the front? It's like a swimming-costume!"

"It's perfectly comfortable."

"And that shirt! My *dear*! You ought to see how it looks! It's a man's shirt, surely. It makes your bust look about twice the size. Oh Edna! You look positively indecent!"

"You can mind your own business. I didn't ask for your opinion."

"Where *are* you going?"

"Well, if you want to know, I'm going on a Ramble, with the Literary and Debating Society."

"With Todd?"

"Yes. Well?"

"He's quite a little Literary and Debating Society in himself, isn't he? Dear old Todd!"

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"Oh no. Oh no."

"I don't see what there is to be so amused about! He's a perfectly nice boy!"

"Who denies it?" It pleased Paula to remain cool and provocative while other people's emotions beat about her head. "Perfectly nice."

"Of course, I suppose he isn't smart enough for you!"

"Well, my dear, if you want to know; he isn't!"

Edna could find no immediate reply. She knew that, in any battle of words or wits, Paula must inevitably overcome her. The experience of a thousand arguments had demonstrated the invulnerability of Paula's self-control. On a thousand occasions she had reminded herself that silence was a weapon; that she might discomfit her sister by presenting a mask of iron nonchalance to her verbal pinpricks. She had sworn never again to expose herself to Paula's mockery.

But now, as Paula attacked Todd, pent-up anger burst its dam and swept away the rickety structure of Edna's restraint.

She drew a deep breath, and said:

"No! Not smart enough for you! Just because he isn't an oily little gigolo, like your ridiculous boy-friends! Just because he isn't a stupid boxer! Just because he doesn't loll about in a café all night long, and pay you compliments, and make eyes at you! Just——"

"My de-ar! Aren't you getting just the tiniest bit worked up?"

"Just because he isn't impressed by all your idiotic airs! Why, good heavens, your way of striking attitudes simply disgusted him!"—Edna observed an infinitesimal contraction

of Paula's bland eyebrows; she thrilled with triumph; she had found a tender spot. Her heart thumped. Her voice shook with exultation: "You . . . you can't even *pose* skilfully! You haven't any idea! You don't know how absurd you look, when you roll your eyes, the way you do! And the funny part is, you're so convinced that you're making an impression! Paula, that sort of thing may be all very well in the Grotto, and such places—the horrible old men there, they know all that kind of posing for what it is, and they play up to it, just to please you. But with real, genuine men, it simply doesn't wash! Why, good gracious, if only I told you some of the things I've heard—the way people laugh at you, the moment your back's turned——"

"That's a lie!"

"Do you know what old Clovis said some time ago?" Edna was inspired. Her imagination soared. She laughed aloud: this was a triumphant moment in her life: "He said, to all of them: 'The way that stupid girl puts on attitudes,' he said, 'the way she acts! The worst of it is,' he said, 'that she's so obvious. Her obviousness puts a man off,' he said, 'although she isn't bad-looking.' Those were his very words! You're obvious! You think you're awfully clever, but anybody can see through you!"

Edna paused for breath. Paula said nothing. Her mouth was curved in a faint, amused smile; but her eyes were steel points, and her fingers were busy with a cigarette, methodically tearing it to pieces. Edna felt like a huntsman who aims at a pigeon and brings down half a dozen pheasants. Paula was wounded; Paula was enraged! A host of ancient insults leapt up to avenge themselves; and simultaneously, Edna's heart began to fill with the magnanimity of the conqueror and the tenderness of the elder sister. Now that she had hurt Paula, Edna was prepared to love her again. But she hastily smothered an impulse to offer apology and peace, and went on to deliver one or two final remarks, in a quiet, remonstrative voice, as one who corrects a naughty child:

"You see, Paula, you oughtn't to give yourself such airs.

You only make yourself look ridiculous. And men worth knowing simply detest that sort of thing! And the others laugh. You ought not to make fun of Todd. You know perfectly well how sweet he is—and intelligent, too. People will only say that you're jealous. You oughtn't to make fun of people that are worth while. Your café-friends, yes. They simply flirt about with you, and forget you the moment you go away. But other——”

Paula interrupted her, speaking in a level voice with an intonation of condescension and scorn that cut like a razor:

“How old are you? Twenty-seven. What men have you met? Only the little clerks who go to your Literary and Debating Society. My poor girl, you know nothing about anything! You're just a plain, ordinary woman of twenty-seven. You've just listened to the usual girls' gossip about boys. You've just gone out with one or two, and kissed them in cinemas and doorways——”

“*Paula!*”

“Perhaps that much; certainly no more. I know you! Oh, I know you!” Paula's voice became shrill; her temper blazed like oil—“You and your Todd! You and your stupid Todd! You want to marry him, I suppose. Go on, say that what you want is a home and children! Yes, you're built for that sort of thing! It sticks out all over you—you're just the usual, ordinary, plain, prettyish sort of average wife. You miserable creature! You have the cheek to speak to me about what I should do, or what I shouldn't do! Why, you're nothing more than a baby—a mature baby—yes, a *very* mature baby! Look at yourself! Yes, you'd better marry quickly, because you'll degenerate soon! You'll run to seed. You'll look like a horrible old chorus-girl by the time you're thirty; all sagging and blowsy——”

“Paula, don't you dare to talk to me like that! Don't you *dare!*”

“Now I'll tell you something! You call your Todd—that weedy little creature—you call him ‘worth-while’? What was it you said? My attitudes simply disgusted him? They dis-

gusted him, did they? All right, I'll tell you something! There's no man in the world whom I couldn't get to fall in love with me, Todd included!"

"Ha! Ha!" exclaimed Edna, on the verge of tears.

"And do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to get him away from you. See? I tell you frankly. You couldn't stop me. I'll get him away from you, and make him run after me like a dog, and then I'll just drop him—d'you hear?—the same way as I dropped Henry Wills, and Max Yates, and George Caradoc, and Edward Moon! The same way as I've dropped Mark Summers, and John Callum, and half a dozen more like them! I'll make him run, and I'll break his heart, just as I did to Tito Barbo! You understand? I tell you, openly; I'm going to make Todd run from you to me. And then, if you like, you can scoop him up when I give him the air! I make a science of it! You doubt what I say? Good; I'll convince you—you wait! You wait! I'll punish you!"

Having given vent to this extraordinary outburst, Paula regained her composure. She sat back, lighting a cigarette.

Edna wept. She sat for five minutes, crying and tugging at her handkerchief with restless, agonised fingers. Then she dried her eyes, looked piteously at Paula, and said:

"You didn't mean all those awful things, you didn't really mean them, did you?"

"Of course not!" said Paula.

But the expression of her face filled her words with a horrible ambiguity. Edna knew that she might balance the words against the face from that moment until sunset without arriving at a satisfactory conclusion. A dark cloud of foreboding drifted between her soul and the sunlight. With a heavy heart, she went out to meet Todd.

(2)

There was nothing evil about Edna. She was, on the whole, a good sample of the better type which her class produces.

She was amiable, honest, and complacent. Her moral standard was high; with her, it was marriage or nothing. She desired nothing more than a comfortable life in a home of her own; friends to gossip with, children to play with, and a husband to make everything safe, regular, and legitimate.

She regarded marriage as a settling-down, but only half admitted that the desirability of a husband increases in proportion to his salary. She believed in love, and could have fallen in love with almost any presentable man who earned over six pounds a week. Well, so could most women. It is a deplorable fact that while about ninety per cent of men marry for love, about ninety per cent of women marry for a home, or a change of environment. Men are the idealists; women are fundamentally practical. The boredom of so many husbands has its roots in the marriage-bed awakening, when, in the sick silence that falls when the bedsprings cease to squeak, illusion collapses like a lump of sugar in a cup of coffee. The even, quiet satisfaction of most wives is the reward of their cool-headed foresight. To waste no more words—man desires woman; woman desires a home.

Edna did not know whether she was in love with Todd. That is to say, she was not in love with Todd. You cannot be unaware of love, any more than you can ignore the sensation of hunger. If you had asked her, point-blank: "Do you love Todd?" she would have replied: "I suppose so." (This is the usual thing.) If Edna had analysed her attitude to Todd, she would have found that she preferred him because he was "steady"—that is, not easily attracted by other women, desirous of marital responsibilities, and in receipt of a good salary. Smith was dark and handsome; Jones was more polished in his manners; Robinson could speak in poetic phraseology; Brown had superb eyes and a car: but Todd was steady. He had the ultimate qualification.

(3)

Edna walked by his side, in the rear of the straggling, far-flung line of ramblers. The day was nearly over. The heat had not diminished, but the sun was no longer visible. There was a treacly, enervating oppressiveness in the air. The sky was tense with waiting thunder. There were clouds like curds, and clouds like tattered banners; clouds like running brushfuls of sepia, and clouds like shivered columns of slate.

They approached Chelstone Wood. In the diffused twilight, it seemed to Edna that Todd was almost handsome. He looked pleasantly rough in his tweed plus-fours. His open flannel shirt disclosed a firm chest perceptibly sprinkled with red hairs.

She took his arm.

Todd's heart beat faster. He was acutely conscious of the odour of her body—that subdued, potent, inescapable female smell which seems to have a pulse of its own—intoxicating, reminiscent of spice, incense, and drums.

“Tired?” he asked.

“No,” said Edna, “not in the least tired.”

“You know, Edna, you don’t want to worry about Paula. You’ll be away from it all, quite soon.”

“How soon?”

“Perhaps six months,” said Todd. There was a thoughtful line between his eyes; his head inclined sideways, as if in calculation.

“A penny for your thoughts,” said Edna. It seemed to her that he must be thinking of Paula. She experienced a spasm of jealousy; a twinge of possessiveness. Paula’s face loomed before her, nightmarish in its ineffable beauty. . . .

“I wasn’t thinking of anything, really.”

“I bet I can guess what you were thinking of,” said Edna, with a trace of bitterness.

“I wasn’t thinking of anything at all, except that it’s been a very pleasant day.”

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather have been with somebody else?"

"Eh? Somebody *else*? Good Lord, no!"

"I bore you," said Edna.

"No, really, honour bright, I'd rather be with you than anybody else!"

Edna slipped her hand into Todd's. His fingers closed on it.

By this time they had reached the fringe of the wood.

"You're a funny boy," said Edna, "I don't know what to think of you, at times. Sometimes you seem so moody, I'm almost afraid of you."

"Oh . . ." murmured Todd, gratified. He encircled Edna's waist with his right arm, and nervously wiped his forehead with his free hand. "Close in the woods, isn't it?"

Edna stopped.

"Oh, just a minute," she said, "I've got a bit of gravel in my shoe." She sat down, took off her shoe, and shook it. "Sit down. Let's have a little rest before we go on . . . it's so hot."

He sat beside her. His lips were almost touching hers.

"Well; can't very well avoid kissing her," he thought.

Their lips met. Her fingers caressed the back of his head. He could see the black half-moons of sweat-damped shirt at her armpits; the gleam of her teeth; a leaf-shaped patch of white skin through an opening in her shirt between two button-holes.

The bracken hid them.

(4)

An hour later, Edna and Todd rejoined the ramblers at the station, in time to catch the last train back to Turners Green. Edna's shorts were marked at the back with damp earth. Her white legs were speckled with gnat-bites. She seemed to walk differently. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were

brilliant. She grasped a shamefaced Todd firmly by the hand, and smiled upon him with a curious, unmistakable air of proprietorship.

Putting her mouth to his ear, she whispered:

"We'll have to get married at once, now, won't we?"

With the cheerless fatalism of a condemned man, Todd replied:

"Yes, at once."

"Aren't you glad?"

"Glad? Eh? Yes, yes. Oh yes, sure, of course I'm glad. Why not?"

Edna's heart glowed within her. Her hand closed over Todd's wrist in a tight clasp.

"I suppose it amounts to that," thought Todd, gloomily aware of the power of Edna's grip: "To have and to hold. The noose. The marital knot. Sex is over-rated. . . . Still, after all, I *did* seduce her, and she is a very nice girl. I'll marry her. It's only right. A man't can't just run around getting girls into trouble . . ." He said, aloud: "Certainly we'll get married! In a month's time, or as soon as you like. I'll buy an engagement-ring to-morrow. We'll see about houses, and furniture."

"Darling!" Edna pressed closer. "Are you sure you really love me?"

"Of course."

"You never say so."

"Well . . ."

Todd made an apologetic gesture.

Edna was content. She rested against Todd's shoulder, while through her mind, like the refrain of a song, ran the thought:

"That's settled. That's settled. Now, Paula, you may do your worst!"

XIX

BULBA



BULBA left Long Acre at about five o'clock in the afternoon, and walked slowly through Seven Dials, thoughtfully turning over in his pocket one lonely little sixpence.

He pondered:

"Shall I buy a new safety-razor blade for twopence? Or buy one for a penny, and a box of matches? At all events, we must reserve fourpence for food. . . . I need some shoe-laces; but perhaps I might make do with the ones I have. Shoe-laces; razor-blade. Rockefeller, also, has some difficulty in deciding how to dispose of his money; so it is not so bad, Bulba, my friend. Bulba, Bulba, Bulba, it is not so bad."

His fingers went to his waistcoat, and encountered only one cigarette. Without further hesitation, he entered a tobacconist's shop, and bought five cigarettes for twopence. He walked on, smoking, across Cambridge Circus.

"Why think of new razor-blades when there are no cigarettes left? We must sharpen up the blade at present in use, Bulba, my gay friend. What did Gogol say? They must love us dirty, for anyone will love us when we are clean. Ah, food——"

He gazed in at the window of a grocer's shop, and carefully considered a ticket with the inscription:

RIPE CHESHIRE CHEESE
per 8d. lb.

He went into the shop, and said:

"That Cheshire cheese, at eightpence a pound—is it nice?"

"Yessir, very nice."

"I should like to try a sample, just a very small sample; say a quarter of a pound."

"Quarter; yessir; that'll be twopence."

"Thank you. If I find that it pleases me, I will order a whole cheese. Thank you. Good afternoon."

Bulba fitted the cheese carefully into an upper pocket in his waistcoat, and then proceeded to a baker's shop. He purchased a twopenny French loaf, which he packed, like a pistol, in his hip-pocket. And so, with his provisions concealed about his person, he walked to Hyde Park to eat his evening meal.

At Hyde Park Corner, he almost collided with Paula.

"Miss Paula!" cried Bulba; and raised his hat, which instantly became limp, as if with ecstasy.

"Oh, hallo, Colonel Bulba."

"This is indeed a delightful surprise!"

"It is! I was just going for a stroll in the Park," said Paula, "it's such a marvellous evening. Would you care to come with me—or are you busy?"

"Would I care! Am I bu-busy!" stammered Bulba, looking ten years younger in his delight, "I am honoured! I am . . . Ei! I have no words!"

"Let's go, then. May I take your arm?"

Bulba gave her an incredulous glance. He could hardly believe his ears.

"May you . . .? I am, you understand, in my working clothes. Had I dreamed that I might see you here, I should have made myself presentable; I should, at least, have shaved and put on another suit——"

"Oh, please, don't bother about that, Colonel Bulba! As if that would make any difference to me. It's the man who holds my arm, not the suit of clothes."

"Splendid!"

They passed the band-stand.

"It was quite a surprise, to meet you," said Paula, "I was thinking about you, at the time."

"About me? Impossible, surely!"

"It's a curious coincidence, but there it is!"

"What were you thinking?"

"Oh, I don't know. Nothing unpleasant, you may be sure."

"Now that, if I may say so, is a very nice thing for me to hear; that you were thinking about me. I know that you were, because why should you say so if you were not? You do not know how good it is to be thought of."

"I've often thought of you."

"And as for me, Miss Paula, I have often thought of you, also. As a dream."

They reached the Serpentine. Salt-white and haughty, a flotilla of swans passed; they seemed to slide over the surface of the water.

"Oh, swans!" exclaimed Paula. "Aren't they beautiful? I wish I'd brought some crumbs to give them."

Without hesitation, Bulba took out his twopenny loaf.

"Fortunately," he said, "I remembered the swans. I came here to feed them." He broke the loaf, and gave half to Paula. "Feed them."

The loaf flew, bit by bit, into the water. The swans lost their dignity. They lunged, wagging their necks, voraciously gobbling. Bulba's heart sank as he thought of his supper. Then he said to himself: "Cheer up, my friend, it might easily be worse. You still have the cheese"; and sunned his soul in the glory of Paula's grateful smile.

"I love swans," said Paula.

"While you were feeding them," said Bulba, with a sigh, "you made a beautiful picture. You, the swans, and the blue water. I am a fortunate man to have seen such a picture."

The swans, having eaten the loaf, turned their backs, and sailed scornfully away.

"Really, I don't think I'm beautiful," said Paula, with candour.

"You are. Surely, you must know that you are?"

"Oh, I just don't bother. But I dare say you must find me very boring, after all the things you've done, and all the people you've met——"

"Good heavens, Miss Paula, I find you as interesting as . . . as life itself."

"No, now be honest! How can you? You've been everywhere, and fought in wars, and known thousands of interesting people; and I'm just an ordinary girl. What on earth is there about me that you could find so interesting?"

"Ha! It is I who must be the bore. I must be very dull. After all, I am an old man."

"You're not. You can't be any more than forty——"

"Fifty," said Bulba.

"You don't look more than forty. And you've had a tremendous amount of experience, and still have a youthful outlook. I hate callow young men. I like men who have *lived*; not tailors' dummies. I was thinking, just before I saw you this evening, how much you've gone through. You must have suffered an awful lot."

"A little; but that is nothing to complain of."

Paula protested, in a little, crooning exclamation: "Mmm!"

"A little suffering gives a man a sense of balance," said Bulba.

"It's wonderful, to look at things like that!" said Paula—with an inward snigger. "You must be so strong. Myself . . . sometimes . . . I get so depressed, so fed up with everything, so bored. . . ."

"My poor child!" said Bulba. "At least, I have never known what boredom feels like. In many ways, I am extremely lucky."

"Sometimes, you make me feel inferior"—as Paula said this, there flashed across her consciousness a sensation of pettiness; she suddenly perceived that this scruffy old soldier was deeper, wider, and higher than she. Instantly, she hated him. She decided, without hesitation, to crush him. She clasped his arm more firmly.

"That should not be so," said Bulba, drawing a deep breath, "because while you will always be triumphant, I have never known anything but defeat."

"But it wasn't your fault."

"Well, it has always pleased me to think that I have done

my best. There are higher things that regulate the rise or fall of a man."

"God?"

"I don't know. But there is a kind of Fate. All the trivial happenings of hundreds of years go to determine what shall happen now. It is like a complicated piece of machinery. We are caught in the wheels. Well, the thing to do is, retain one's humour and dignity, eh? There is always hope. We are like dogs in a park—we may not enter life, except on a lead. This lead is Hope. It drags us into the swamp, *chort vozmi!*—and out of the swamp, and on, on, on, always on. It keeps us going as far as the grave. Perhaps beyond the grave—who knows? As the saying goes, thank God that we know so little!"

"Let's sit down," said Paula.

Joy and terror filled Bulba's heart—joy at the prospect of sitting next to Paula, and terror at the thought of the ticket-collector, who might at any moment demand twopence for the chair-tickets.

"On the grass?" said Bulba, hopefully.

"No, let's sit on a chair."

They sat down.

"I have not enjoyed a day so much for years!" said Bulba, "Somehow, when I am with you, I feel happy."

"And me," said Paula.

"Now I see your true self!" cried Bulba, in an exalted voice. "You are a sweet, honest girl! Everything else is a pose."

"I think you must be the only person who really understands," said Paula, moving closer to Bulba, so that her thigh touched his. Her practised ears heard his rapid breathing. She knew that he was as a toy in her hands.

"I see you very clearly!" cried Bulba, "I see——"

"Got your tickets, sir?" asked a voice.

Bulba's heart gave a sickening leap into his throat, and stuck there. He looked up. The ticket-collector stood over him, holding a pink roll of tickets and a steel punch. Bulba felt like a man in the grip of a tiger. He tensed his stomach-

muscles, and waited for the blow to fall. Meanwhile, he said, desperately:

"Yes!"

Miraculously, the ticket-collector passed on. Acutely conscious of his bitter poverty, Bulba became silent. His exaltation had passed. He felt that something had knocked a hole in his bosom, and that into this hole cold, black water was steadily pouring. He lit a cigarette, and blew smoke-rings into the still air.

"How clever!" exclaimed Paula.

"What?"

"Those smoke-rings. How do you do it?"

"It is not difficult," said Bulba.

"Like this?" Paula advanced her face, formed her mouth into a circle, and ejected a shapeless puff of smoke.

"Wider," said Bulba.

"Wider; I see . . ."

Bulba's eyes were fixed on Paula's lips. He felt his heart thumping again.

Smoke exuded from Paula's open mouth. Her eyes were closed. She looked like some languid goddess of passion, breathing incense.

Madness overcame Bulba. Like a man plunging into fire he thrust his face through the curling smoke, and kissed Paula on the lips.

She leapt to her feet, and struck him a stinging blow in the face.

"How dare you!" she cried, "How *dare* you!"

"Forgive," said Bulba.

She struck him again, and again.

Bulba stood still. In that moment, he perceived the truth of the matter. He saw how Paula had been playing with him. His face burned red; not with the force of her blows, but with shame. His eyes stared into hers.

But it seemed to Paula that this shabby little man was full of a terrible dignity.

She said:

"You miserable little worm! You horrible old tramp! Hero! Martyr! Trying to assault a defenceless woman! Ugh! Get out of my sight! Go away, or I'll call a policeman!"

Bulba bowed, turned on his heel, and walked away across the grass.

The sun had almost sunk. It hung low in the sky. For one moment, Bulba, walking Westward, obscured the sun from Paula's vision; his weary, hungry body was outlined in a white and refulgent light. Then he moved to the left, and the sun flared above him like a lamp; and he was only a small shabby man, trying to bear himself with dignity, urging his feet towards the gate, and dragging behind him a long black shadow trailing in the dust and the burnt-up grass.

As Paula watched him go, she felt something like shame, and a sense of guilt. Her heart seemed to contract; there was a sensation of weight in her chest, as if an invisible hand were pressing on the great artery there. She tried to draw a deep breath, but the weight would not lift. She thought, for a moment, struck her hands together, and said, with an air of discovery:

"Well I'm blessed! This must actually be what they call heartache!"

She sighed. The weight lifted.

Surprised and delighted by this novel experience, Paula left the park.

XX

REHEARSAL



A FORTNIGHT later, Bulba stood on the stage of the Flava Theatre, and acted the part of the waiter in the fourth rehearsal of *The Case of Heinrich Lobst*.

The stage was roughly set. It was too small for the tumultuous first scene. On the left, nine people huddled in a group, like baboons, about a mattress and a heap of sacking. Six more sat on the right, on three sofas arranged in the form of a triangle. The restaurant, in the centre, was represented by a deal table embellished with a cracked cup and a beer-bottle; a chair, a stool, a beer-crate, and a sugar-box. Kasbek was wedged in a corner, with the First Harlot's bony elbow in his ribs, and the Fat Man's heel on his toe; while Pasta Flava, it must be admitted, sat on the chair. The stage bore some resemblance to the Black Hole of Calcutta. It would not be going too far to say that it was hopelessly overcrowded.

"Now, enter Fate! Mr. Petroneli, will you be so kind as to enter?" said Kasbek.

Ponderous and simian in his under-vest, sheepishly holding a little pink candle between a thumb and a forefinger, Petroneli shouldered his way out of the wings.

"Laugh ironically," said Kasbek.

"Merher!" grunted Petroneli.

"My dear sir, that is not an ironic laugh. Pitch your voice higher. Bear in mind the bleating of a goat. Now——"

"Mye-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh!"

"I did not say imitate the bleating of a goat! Really, my good sir! Is it necessary to go over this laugh every time? An ironic laugh—*not* a cough—*not* a farmyard imitation. Now——"

"Har-har-har-har-har."

"That's better. Now, Colonel——"

Bulba cleared his throat, and began, in a lugubrious voice:

"Ah, life is a fetid puddle. To live is like being slowly torn to pieces by the sepulchral teeth of a large pale horse, on a foggy November night in Chemnitz. The constant clattering of dishes in this place is like the chattering of a madman's teeth. I remember my father. His teeth chattered. How he used to bite me, because he loved to see his tooth-marks in my tender flesh! God rest his soul. Now I must serve the soup. Soup is associated in my soul with my grandmother. She had only one tooth, and ate only soup; she loved to feel the soup flow round it. Oh God—if she had had two teeth, she might have been able to whistle. One long tooth, as large as a knife-handle. How clearly I can see it. And grandfather, may he rest in peace, he tried to sew pearl buttons to her gums, to take the place of teeth—he cut the buttons from his pants with a pruning-knife. Mushroom-soup. I give the Princess mushroom-soup. Ghostly mushrooms, pallid fungi——"

"Proceed, Princess," said Kasbek.

"I would I had spilt your blood——"

"More vehemently, if you please!"

"I woulder that I had spilter your *berlud-er!*" screamed Pasta Flava, her eyes bulging like turnips, "I hate you! I want you to understand that I hate you because you do not love me! I cannot stop hating you until you start to love me. And until I love you, I must torture you! Therefore, love me because I torment you! I cannot express my soul except by hurting you!"

"Who does he think he is?" demanded Mrs. Glawb, "Lord Muck, or somebody? I don't have to look to him for anything! Gah!"

"Madame, Madame!" cried Kasbek, in an imploring voice.

"Don't you Madame me!" shrieked Mrs. Glawb. "Wodger think you are, anyway?"

"Ssh!"

"Princess, why do you torment me so?" asked Bulba. "Am I not a human being, the same as you? Deep down in the kitchens, there are the stock-pots, and in the stock-pots there live white worms, little white worms——"

"And don't you shush me!" cried Mrs. Glawb, "I won't be shut up!"

"——Little white worms!——" cried Bulba, again.

"I ain't going to be ruled over and ordered about by a foreigner!" bawled Mrs. Glawb.

"LITTLE WHITE WORMS!" roared Bulba.

"Mrs. Glawb, if you don't want to go on, please leave the theatre!" said Kasbek.

"Just for your cheek, I won't!"

"Very well, then stay here; but——"

"Then just for your cheek, I'll go!"

Mrs. Glawb arose, and pushed her way out.

"Madame, you are disturbing everything!" exclaimed Kasbek.

"Well then, just for that, I'll stay where I am!" declared Mrs. Glawb, struggling back to the mattress. "Gah! I defies yer!"

"Princess, why are you so unkind to me?" cried Bulba.

"I forget," said Pasta Flava. "Kasbek, darling—— why am I so unkind to him?"

"Because——" prompted Kasbek.

"Because!" said Pasta Flava, brightly, to Bulba.

"'Because only through hatred can I learn . . .'"

"Oh, of course! Darling! How stupid I am. . . . Ahem! Because only through hatred can I learn to love you, Heinrich Lobst. My soul finds expression in bitter drops of pain which bubble and distil in the crucible of life."

"Merher!" grunted Petroneli.

"*Not Merher——Ha-ha-ha!*" said Kasbek.

"Har-har-har!" ejaculated Petroneli; the gusty aspirates proceeded from his enormous lungs like a high wind, and everybody on the stage became aware that he had been eating onions, and drinking beer, and sucking peppermints.

The warmth of his fingers had softened the candle, which drooped like a dying tulip.

"Not quite so loud," said Kasbek.

"Merher," muttered Petroneli, sullenly.

"An ironic laugh; try again."

"Her-her-her!" yelled Petroneli, opening his mouth so wide that one could almost (in a manner of speaking) see the holes in his socks.

"Now," said Kasbek, "when Colonel Bulba stoops to retaliate, the fight will start in the Doss-house. Are you ready? —Go!"

Bulba stooped. In the wings, Simson the Samson applied the back of his right hand to his stupid lips, puffed out his cheeks, and reproduced a rude noise:

Ppppphut!

The confusion, from that moment, became indescribable. Everybody seemed to have been waiting, eager to give vent to ear-splitting noise. Two uproars, in the Restaurant and the Doss-house, raced neck and neck; and then, to make matters worse, the six people in the Brothel added their voices. Words came in flying chunks, pelting torrents, whirring fragments, and racing floods. Shrill fragments distinguished themselves, and darted across the consciousness as shrimps dart across a pool. Broken words, shattered phrases, and splintered exclamations struck the ear-drums like shrapnel. It was chaos —hellish pandemonium.

The tumult died. Pasta Flava cleared her strained throat, and said:

"Darling! Doesn't it carry you away?" She disentangled her fingers from Bulba's hair, "Doesn't it take you out of yourself? Isn't it real?"

"That," said Kasbek, "is the whole point in realistic drama. Now, let us go over this scene again . . ."

"But not while I'm here!" said John Stone Mogador, to Irene. "Let's get out of this."

"But I promised to wait for a friend."

"Listen, Irene, I'm not waiting for any dame on earth."

"But——"

Mogador rose, without further argument, and walked to the door. Irene followed him.

"Well, all right," she said, "we won't wait."

As they reached the street, Paula appeared.

"Well, now! Here she is!" cried Irene, "Let me introduce you. Miss Paula Barker, Mr. John Stone Mogador!"

"Glad to know you," said Mogador, devouring Paula with his eyes.

"How do you do," said Paula, without enthusiasm.

"Are you going to see Pasta Flava?" asked Irene.

"I suppose so," said Paula.

"They seem to be raising Cain in there," remarked Mogador, "I don't think you'll stick it out for long."

"Really?"

"Fact. I don't think you'd better go in, Miss Barker; it'll give you a pain. Listen, why not come along with us? Come and have a cocktail at the Café of the Winds."

"Well . . . why not?"

"In you get," said Mogador.

The car-door slammed. The engine purred like a great man-eating cat.

It would have occurred to an all-knowing onlooker that the purr might well have proceeded from the smooth white throat of Paula Barker.

"Now . . ." said John Stone Mogador.

The car slid away.

XXI

IN THE CAFÉ OF THE WINDS



THE Café of the Winds contains an atmosphere which goes to the head.

As you set foot in the place, you are caught in intricate coils of noise. You feel your senses ebbing into the pouting mouths of the clarinets. The muted trumpets and the gilded saxophones pump a husky fog into the convolutions of your brain. You breathe in time with the inhalations and exhalations of the accordions, which seem to be the unresting lungs of the establishment. You palpitate to the twanging of the guitars and the thudding of the drums. Go there late at night, and you will see the cream of London society and all the celebrities on the dance-floor in one heaving block; dancing, laughing, shouting, clinging, cuddling, embracing, pulling, pushing, nuzzling, furtively shoulder-kissing, indulging in secretive explorations and manipulations, and furtive buccal contacts, rubbing, pinching, nestling, stroking, purring and oscillating.

And dominating everything—a Dagon, a symbol—looms and gapes the grunting brazen throat of the Tuba.

(2)

When Mogador arrived with Irene and Paula, the Café of the Winds was practically empty. Two or three couples danced. A dozen people were eating and drinking.

“What’ll you have?” asked Mogador, “What say we eat?”

“I don’t think I will,” said Paula. “Just a drink of some sort.”

“Champagne?”

"Very well."

"Any particular kind you prefer?"

"To be perfectly frank," said Paula, "if you gave me ginger beer and said it was champagne, I should probably be none the wiser."

"That's the way to talk. I like to hear straight talk. It gives me a pain to hear some women say 'Heidsieck Monopole', or 'Bollinger'—as if they knew the difference! To be quite candid, I don't know the difference myself."

"Jaded palate," said Paula.

"Jaded nothing! If you drink coffee and cheap beer for the first twenty-five years of your life, take it from me, champagne is just champagne afterwards."

"How just like a self-made man!" said Paula, with some scorn.

"What d'you mean by that?"

"Self-made men either insist on their origins, or else go to the opposite extreme," said Paula, coolly. "You insist."

"So what?" said Mogador, with a mirthless smile.

"Nothing," said Paula. Watching, she could see that Mogador was annoyed. She reasoned with herself: *This is good strategy. Everybody is nice to him. He's used to politeness. He's used to homage. Irritate him! Rouse him, anyway! Don't be lofty; just be cool, and impudent. Prick him to some kind of reaction, without antagonising him!*

"You seem to have met a lot of self-made men," said Mogador, with ominous sweetness, "I suppose you like them better when they've been made by somebody else?"

"It depends how they're made," said Paula, "but I can't say I'm keen on that home-made look." She accompanied with a superb smile, which seemed to indicate that she was merely joking.

"Well . . . you're no fool," said Mogador.

Paula turned her faultless profile to Mogador, and addressed Irene:

"How did the rehearsal go?"

"Terrible!" said Irene.

"Really?"

"It was like a madhouse!"

"Well, my dear, what can you expect? Poor old Pasta Flava! She needs a plumber, to put a washer on her larynx; she sort of——"

"You ought not to poke fun at Pasta Flava," said Irene. "She's awfully nice, really, and she does mean well, even if she is a bit queer."

"Personally," said Paula, "I'm not concerned with good intentions. I never did have any sympathy with weakness and foolishness."

"Hear hear!" cried Mogador, heartily, "I agree with you there. You're a smart girl!"

Irene's face darkened a little.

Mogador glanced from Paula to Irene, and back again. Irene must have perceived appraisal in his glance: she blinked uneasily. She was glad when the waiter filled her glass; she needed inspiration.

"Now I've got some wine at my flat," said Mogador. "Perhaps the rarest wine in the world."

"Fine weather we are having," said Paula.

"I said, I've got the rarest wine in the world!" said Mogador.

"Really?" said Paula.

"Yes. There's only one bottle of it in existence, and I've got it!"

"What wine is that?" asked Paula.

"Zoltany. Have you ever heard of it?"

"No."

"It comes from Hungary. Well, once, about three hundred years ago, in sixteen-something, they had one marvellous vintage. I don't know why—maybe it was the weather, or something. Well, in that year, they turned out a number of casks of wine like nothing they'd ever tasted before. It came from the vineyard of a fellow called Zoltan. Men did murder to get that wine. His sons kept some of it as a sort of heirloom, all sealed up in bottles. One bottle got hidden away

so well that nobody could find it until the year 1872. Then a French duke bought it, and paid so God damn much for it, he just didn't dare to drink it. To cut a long story short, I finally got hold of it. I paid——"

"What's it like?" asked Paula.

"Well, to be quite candid, *I* haven't dared to open it, as yet. I paid——"

"How awfully interesting! Why don't you taste it, just to see what it's like? I should be dying of curiosity!"

"Well, I'm saving it for some big occasion. Sooner or later, I'll open it, and drink it. It'll be a dear drink! I paid——"

"My dear Mr. Mogador, why are you so anxious to tell me how much you paid for it? I shan't be in the least impressed!"

"*I should love to see it!*" said Irene.

"Eh? Oh, yes," said Mogador, with a momentary flash of surprise which betrayed the fact that he had completely forgotten her existence; "Yes, yes. . . ."

He gazed at Paula. She looked back at him, as at an equal. He decided that she was extremely beautiful; beautiful, but irritating. She aroused in him a desire to assert his masculine will to dominate.

Ninety per cent of sexuality has its roots in the interrelation of the masculine will to dominate and the feminine will to submit.

Mogador offered his cigarette-case.

"Try one of these," he said, with his great ivory smile, "I have them grown for me."

Paula took a cigarette. His platinum lighter clicked, and shot out its pear-shaped spangle of yellow fire.

"You've heard of the Abdul Achmed tobacco plantation?" continued Mogador. "Well, it's mine. I own it. Do you know why I bought it? I'll tell you. I bought it to please a lady. She liked the tobacco, so I bought the plantation—just to please her. It was what you might call a whim, a crazy fancy. I have them go over the pick of the crop, and sort out the finest leaves for my exclusive use. I have them made up

over here, by a Greek, one of the finest cigarette-makers in the world. I pay him three hundred a year, just to roll my cigarettes for me, at the rate of five hundred a week. All in all, they work out at the rate of over two shillings for each cigarette. What d'you think of them?"

Paula turned the long white cylinder in her fingers; looked at the mouthpiece, the gold tip, the filter, and the glowing end; sniffed delicately at the fragrant blue smoke, and took a tentative puff.

"Acrid and tasteless," she said, and dropped the cigarette into an ash-tray.

"I think they're marvellous!" said Irene.

"I'd rather smoke an ordinary Players," said Paula.

"To be perfectly candid," said Mogador, "so would I!"

At this, Irene grew pale.

(3)

By this time, the evening crowd had begun to come in. People arrived in pairs, trios, and groups—goggling innocents arm-in-arm with the blasé; University Sandwiches, composed of one trollop between two nincompoops; cliques, clusters, and trickles, vitiated, washed-out, and chewed-up; gay, gouty old gentlemen who should have had the decency to die in 1910; middle-aged ladies, ossified or oleaginous; Baruch, First Baron Finkelbaum, ennobled for making soldiers' puttees; a sprinkling of those gnarled old pioneers, the Settlers of Golders Green*; Lady Harriet Blyme, whose husband was, apparently, knighted for receiving stolen property; the usual denizens of such places—pfui!—nugatory, dreary, dismal, and pertaining to the grim realms of teratology; sickly exotics, psychopathic wash-outs, alcoholic bats, long-legged beasts and things that go bump in the night, good Lord deliver us!

The scat-singer sang, in conclusion:

* . . . "Settlers of Golders Green":—they settled to the extent of 3, 4. in the £1.

*. . . So Ah sing mah song—
Oh, hoodie hi de ho de hi de ho!
Oh ho-o-o-o-o-o-o-ooooooooh!
All . . . day . . . long.”*

And the crescendo of “Ultramarina Blues” crashed into them like a charge of grape-shot.

Sir Edward Saranam Gatchami, the Indian magnate, came over to Mogador’s table.

“Ha-ha!” he said. “You are relax?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You think gold shares——?” he jerked an expressive thumb towards the ceiling.

“Yes, I think so.”

“To-day I am allotted five thousand Mogador Gold, preference shares. You must make gold go——” Sir Edward Saranam Gatchami jerked his thumb again, and laughed richly.

“Take a seat. Miss Paula Barker, Sir Edward Saranam Gatchami. Miss Irene Jackson, my um, er, secretary.”

“Pleased! Pleased!” said Sir Edward.

“Say we dance?” said Mogador, to Paula.

“Well, why not?”

Irene glared; but Sir Edward was already yearning towards her, chattering. Paula and Mogador rose, stepped into the current of the dancers, and were swept away.

Irene breathed heavily. She looked over Sir Edward’s shoulder, peered anxiously into the crowd, and managed to distinguish the fine, waving hair of Mogador and the blonde head of Paula. She saw the continuous movements of Mogador’s lips; she told herself, with some misgiving, that he had rather too much to say.

The drumsticks stammered on the parchment, a trumpet, muted with a bowler-hat, screamed and sobbed; a horn poured out an endless, soothing, creamy note. Mogador added his voice to the musio.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he said, “I don’t want you to get

me wrong, Miss Paula. I want you to understand. I may appear to be a bit of a roughneck. I may appear to have had a rough youth. Well, all right; I have had a rough time of it—I've hit the rock-bottom, in my day; and liked it. You understand, if you spend all your life fighting, you don't find much time to get polish, and all that sort of thing."

"Of course, I do understand, really," said Paula. "You mustn't care if I sound rather swinish."

"I——"

"But you mustn't boast."

"I never boast. I was just telling you plain facts. You maybe don't know just how a man has got to live. He's got to be a tiger. Life is a God-damned jungle, see? If you start from zero, you can spend your time getting polished or growing claws; but you can't do both. I've got claws—several million claws," Mogador laughed, a short, grim laugh—"Say what you like I'd rather have claws than polish. But don't get me wrong. My mentality never did belong among all the home-made stuff. I like polish as well as any man. I like girls like you, that know how to wear their clothes, and handle their tongues. I like polish. I like wit. I like people like you. I like your backchat. I like the way you come back with a sharp, clever answer—pat!—like that. It gives me a kick. I look at a girl like you, and I say: 'There goes a finished product.' I've got fastidious. There are hundreds of dames that run after me. I'm not boasting; I'm stating a fact. I handle interests worth two hundred and fifty million pounds. It's the black-and-white banknotes they run after, not me. So I sit back, and take my choice. I hate women that are obvious. I like polish. Not airs and graces, but *polish*. You don't give yourself airs. Everything you do comes out spontaneous. You're slick, beautiful, and perfectly finished. I like you."

"This is so sudden," murmured Paula, with irony.

"I'm not kidding. You see me as I am; no pretence. Everybody knows my origin. My mother was a scrub-woman; my father was a Swede labourer. I've slept in ash-

bins and eaten offal. And do you think I'm proud of it? No. Do you think I feel that I belong in the lower orders? No. They give me a pain. I like fine things. I like expensive things——"

"Then you'd probably like me. I would almost certainly come frightfully expensive."

"Joking aside. No kidding."

"Well, joking aside, what do you want me to do about it?"

"Well, nothing; I don't know. You might meet me some time?"

"Oh, might I? Thanks, but I don't think I will."

"Why not?"

"I don't have to give any explanation."

"Why shouldn't you see me again?"

"Does it occur to you that I might not like you? My dear Mr. Mogador, doesn't it strike you that I might find you cheap, and showy——" *Rouse him!* cried her inner self, *Annoy him! Make him hunt! Keep him on the run!*

"Say, listen——"

A plangent voice screamed, almost in his ear:

"Oh, Toots darling! Did you hear about poor old Poppets? She had an affair with a Pole last month, and she's been suffering with splinters ever since! He-he-he-he-he-he!"

"Say, listen!" snapped Mogador, in his Wolf-of-Wall-Street voice, "What d'you mean, cheap and showy? Showy, I grant you. Look what I've got to show, by God! But cheap? Don't make me laugh!"

"I like men of my own age," said Paula.

"How old d'you think I am, then?"

"Forty-nine."

"Forty—great God! I'm forty-five, and I look less, and you know it!"

"Actually, you look about fifty-two. I only said forty-nine out of politeness."

"Now listen. Are you trying to get me mad?"

"What would happen if I were?"

Mogador bit his lip, and reflected that he had never yet encountered a woman with so profound a capacity for stirring up his anger. He quivered on the verge of an outburst. It occurred to him that he was nearer to losing his temper than he had been in the last ten years. He had watched the melting of millions of pounds with less emotion. He looked at Paula with some awe.

"You're a remarkable woman!" he said.

An American voice twanged nearby:

"Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy! Was that dame dumb or was she dumb? Last Saturday night I put a certain proposition to her, and believe me or believe me not, it was Wednesday before she slapped my face!"

"Yes, you certainly are a most remarkable woman!" said Mogador. "Now why not come and have dinner with me next Tuesday?"

"Well, even if I wanted to," said Paula, "it wouldn't be fair to Irene."

"Irene hell! She's employed as my secretary."

"But after all, she's my friend."

"Listen, kid, I can tell you something out of a hell of a lifetime of experience. Friendship is a lot of boloney. Friendship is all hooey. Friendship is a mug's game—it gets you nowhere. There's no such thing as a friend that won't let you down. There ain't a friend in the whole world who wouldn't nail you down to the God-damned cross for thirty pieces of silver, you mark my words. Hell take all friendship!"

"Hm. So you want me to nail Irene down to the cross for thirty pieces of silver?"

"I want you to do no such thing. I just ask you to come and have dinner with me. I'd like to talk to you. Next Tuesday."

"Well, I may or I may not."

"Let me know now."

"Well, I don't know. . . ."

"Ah, come on—quick! The music's stopping. Make it snappy."

"I say, Mr. Mogador, I'm not your secretary. Try and be a little more polite."

"Ah, listen, Paula! Will you meet me at eight o'clock next Tuesday, in the lounge of the Hotel Superlative."

"That place? I don't like it. They have too much chromium plate about. It's so crude."

"Well, then, the Magnificent? The Oriflamme? The Golden Palace? Or here, the Café of the Winds? Somewhere where we can have a quiet chat——"

"The less quiet it is, the better I like it. Here."

"Good. Eight o'clock?"

"Seven."

"But I shall be engaged until eight."

"Never mind, then. We'll call our appointment off."

"No, I'll see you at seven, then."

"All right."

The band crashed into the last phrase of the tune. Dancing past, Paula could see the sweating faces of the musicians. The right arm of the trombone-player jerked backwards and forwards like the arm of a boxer at a punching-ball. The trumpeter seemed to be blowing his heart and viscera into his little instrument. An incongruously small man wrestled with a double-bass as with a mortal enemy, clutching it by the throat and beating it in the belly, wringing from it a "Zoomp—zoomp!" of lazy protest. Only one man seemed calm—the man who shouldered the colossal coil of the Tubaphone. He stood still, making lip-movements such as one makes in order to spit out a crumb of tobacco; while from the abysmal metal mouth above him there proceeded profound, undistinguishable burbling grunts—the backbone of all the noise.

"Seven, here, Tuesday!" said Mogador.

"If I don't forget."

"Say yes or no."

"Probably."

Mogador wrestled with an impulse to say: "Go to hell!" But he reflected that he wanted to show this girl who was

master. He wanted to see her again. Her mouth seemed to be crimson with dormant passion; her body vibrated as she danced; beneath the cool shell and the icy mask, Mogador felt that he could detect something ferocious. One lucky touch, look, word, or gesture, he told himself, might release a volcanic eruption of lust. It would be ridiculous to let her go, now. He held her closer. He could distinctly feel, against his chest, her hard and protuberant breasts. He swallowed. Something in his bosom seemed to contract.

The music stopped. Applause crackled. Paula and Mogador returned to their table.

As he shouldered a pathway through the crowd, Mogador said:

"Do try and be here on Tuesday."

"I'll see." Somebody pushed past Paula from behind. She took the opportunity of falling sideways on to Mogador and leaning heavily on his shoulder for a moment. "Perhaps I will."

"Well, I'll be waiting here for you, whatever happens."

"Very well." Paula felt limp with triumph.

Irene, looking anxiously at Mogador's smooth face, thought that she could detect an expression of annoyance and ennui.

She sighed with relief, and was reassured.

ON THE VERGE OF CHANGE



BUT if one's ears burn when one is the subject of scandalous discussion, Irene's ears should, by this time, have become incandescent. In the Barker shop-parlour, Mrs. Barker, Mrs. Socket, and Mrs. Clark were rounding off a little debate on Irene's moral character. They had been at it for hours.

"There, now!" said Mrs. Socket, "Ten pounds a week, she gets! Well, I don't mind telling you, you couldn't buy me not for no money; no, but for no money you couldn't buy me. What self-respect can the girl have, to take and sell herself for ten pounds a week? She ought to be kicked out into the gutter, the wicked little hussy! And I must say, Mrs. Barker, I'm grieved and surprised at you, harbouring a bad woman under your roof."

"Just like the Hooper girl," said Mrs. Clark.

"Maud Hooper?" asked Mrs. Barker.

"That's right," said Mrs. Socket, "May Hooper's Maudie. She was worse still. She was a bad girl, if ever there was one! She took and went wrong with a guardsman, if you please. No more than sixteen year old, at the time. It just shows you, she was bad; bad to the backbone. I always did say so."

"Did she used to go out with a lot of boys?" asked Mrs. Clark.

"No, the two-faced little cat! She never used to go out with nobody. She used to sit quiet, just like she couldn't say 'Boo!' to a goose. Ah, I could see through *her*! Time and time agin I says to myself, I says: 'I can see through you, my lady.' Ah, you mark my words, them quiet ones are always the worse."

"So what happened?" asked Mrs. Barker.

"Ha! She was confined and she passed away. They say it was somethink shocking to listen to her. 'Billy, where's Billy?'

The guardsman's name was Billy. 'Billy, where's Billy?' " said Mrs. Socket, with sarcasm. "Her and her Billy! She had the cheek to go and say: 'Mummy, I love Billy!' Ah, you may well say, 'What?' Them was her very words. I got it from a party that was present at the time. She didn't have no shame. Love Billy! That's what they get out of all these here twopenny papers they read."

"I'd be ashamed to go and say a thing like that," said Mrs. Barker.

"I wouldn't lower meself," said Mrs. Clark.

"Why didn't he go and marry her?" demanded Mrs. Socket. "No. Not them. They're not the marrying kind, they ain't. Love! To go and do a thing like that, for love! Why, it's pretty nigh as bad as taking and selling yourself, like Mrs. Jackson's Irene."

"Well, I must say, that kind of thing never interested me at all," said Mrs. Clark.

"Nor me," said Mrs. Barker.

"Nor me neither," said Mrs. Socket. "D'you know what Martha Ferguson says to me last Saturday? She says: 'What's married life without it?' Disgusting, I calls it! Filthy! Ah, and she ain't no better than she should be. I seen her talking to the postman; and her old enough to be his mother. I seen her, with these two eyes, talking to the postman! Well, thank God that sort of thing never appealed to me, never. Mind you, when I was a gal, there was plenty after me."

"Me too," said Mrs. Barker and Mrs. Clark, simultaneously.

"There was one feller, oh he was a nice feller, a feller called Morgan, a perfect gentleman, in the drapery. He was a van-driver. I might of married him, but he was only earning eighteen shillings a week at the time, and Socket was making over two pounds at the plumbing. Oh yes, if you want to go and get into trouble with fellers just on account of love, a fine mess you'd be in! But to go and do it for money! To go and sell yourself! Why, that girl's a nore, no better!"

"Who told you there was anything on between her and this man?" asked Mrs. Barker.

"Who told me! I wasn't born yesterday. I can put two and two together," said Mrs. Socket.

"It's plain enough," said Mrs. Clark.

"Plain! I should say so! Ask yourself—what can a girl like Irene Jackson do, to earn ten pound a week? What else would a man pay her ten pound a week *for*? Though what he can see in her——"

"Ssh!" hissed Mrs. Barker.

Mr. Jackson's languid footsteps could be heard, dragging along the passage.

"Well, I always did say and always will say that eightpence a quarter's a shameful price to pay for tea!" screamed Mrs. Socket, with a wink; and added, in an undertone: "I tell the truth, and fear no man, and a fat lot I care who hears me."

But unfortunately, in spite of Mrs. Socket's piercingly audible camouflaging remark about the price of tea, Mr. Jackson had overheard that which referred to Irene. He climbed the stairs, shaking his lazy fat head, and complained to his wife:

"Nice thing! Oh, very nice!"

"What, dear?" asked Mrs. Jackson.

"The way people are talking."

"What about?"

"Irene."

"What about Irene?"

"Her and her ten pound a week. Oh, it's a nice thing to have to put up with, to have your daughters going wrong for ten pound a week! See? That's all the thanks I get, for trying to bring my children up right! To think how I've always kept myself straight and decent, and slaved and suffered to keep a roof over their heads—and look at the thanks I get! It's not as if I'd been a bad man. I've always set my children an example. And now, this. Ten pound a week. To go and sell her body for ten pound a week! Oh, what I have to bear; Oh, Oh! It's a plot! It's a conspiracy, to make me

go and end it all! That's what it is, a plot—you went and put her up to it, so as to drive me to commit suicide!"

"But——"

"That's what it is! Like mother, like daughter. You went and incited her to sell her body, so as to kill me with shame! Isn't it enough that I went and married a charwoman, without *this*? Now she wants to kill me, so she can run off with somebody else! Oh——"

"For——"

"What were you going to say? What filthy word were you going to use? Oh! Oh God! Oh, what a house of prostitution this is! Oh, you bad woman——"

"But what is our Irene doing?" asked Mrs. Jackson, in tears.

"Living in sin with this Mogador man, for ten pound a week!" shouted Mr. Jackson. "You know it as well as I do! Gimme a knife! Gimme a knife! Alfred, gimme a knife!"

"Oh, be quiet!" said Alfred.

"So that's it!" cried Oswald, "Well, to tell you the truth, I knew it all along, but I didn't say anything. Living with Mogador! There's a disgrace for you, eh? For only ten pounds a week! A millionaire like that! The girl *can't* be any good!"

"That's why you keep on cadging money from her, I suppose," said Alfred.

"You shut up!" shouted Oswald.

"Shut up yourself!"

"Lay down, you miserable errand-boy!"

"Boys! Boys!" cried Mrs. Jackson.

"Oh my head! My head!" cried Mr. Jackson. "Oh, be *quiet*! Haven't I got *enough* to bear, without all this *noise*? . . . And no *supper* ready! Oh, *why* is there no *supper* ready? Oh, *why* doesn't somebody get *supper* ready? Am I to sit here, like Lazarus in torment, and beg and pray for a crust of bread to moisten my parched tongue? Am I to lie like a dog, with my tongue hanging out——"

"Oh, don't keep on!" cried Alfred.

"There's a nice way to talk! Oh, God, what children have I brought into the world! Street-walkers and parricides! To go and talk in that tone of voice to your own father what bore you! To insult the one what gave you life! Ten pound a week! To go and lose a dearer thing than life for the sake of filthy lucre! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"Don't upset yourself, dear," sobbed Mrs. Jackson, "it must be a mistake. No daughter of mine would do a thing like that. You see, to-morrow we'll ask her all about it."

(2)

Next morning, however, Irene appeared in a state of excitement.

"Mother!" she said. "Get dressed at once! I've found a perfectly marvellous flat I want you to see!"

"Flat?" asked Mrs. Jackson; while Mr. Jackson shook his head gloomily, gazing with new interest at Irene's silver fox. Oswald nodded knowingly.

"A beautiful flat! It's in Flowerdew Square."

"That's one of the nicest parts of the neighbourhood. It must be very expensive," said Mrs. Jackson.

"No, not very. And it's fully furnished! You'll be able to get rid of all this horrible old furniture, and have a nice, furnished flat. And the use of a bathroom!"

"Oh, not a self-contained flat?" said Oswald.

"Well, get dressed, anyway, and come," said Irene, "and hurry, or we may lose it."

Mr. Jackson lurched into the bedroom, and dressed. Since Irene's association with John Stone Mogador, Jackson had bought himself new clothes. He considered that a gentleman must look sombre. He had a black suit and a black tie, in which he presented the appearance of a bereaved undertaker. He had also procured a bowler hat, of remarkable inflexibility. It was rather too small for his melonlike head, and gave him a headache; but he persisted in wearing it. One must suffer

in order to be beautiful. Also, *noblesse oblige*. And as for Oswald, he was elegant. Elegant: no other word is adequate. He wore a blue suit with a noticeable stripe, a cream-coloured shirt, a tie which a blind man could hardly have failed to see, the kind of hat that one associates with American gangsters, grey socks, and brown shoes. When I add that he carried lemon-coloured gloves, you will appreciate the fact that he was a gentleman. Money has nothing to do with gentility. It is in the blood. It is an instinct. There are millionaires who do not think of carrying lemon-coloured gloves.

Flowerdew Square is, as Mrs. Jackson so neatly put it, one of the nicest parts of Turners Green. It consists of forty-five houses, arranged about an oval of railed-in grass, in which several poplar trees grow. Residents in Flowerdew Square are entitled to use the grass, to walk on; but in the last forty years, nobody has desired to do so, with the exception of one old gentleman who, on inquiry, discovered that nobody in living memory had ever been able to find a key to the gate. He wrote to the newspapers about it.

Mr. Jackson glanced at the trees with approval.

"Quite countryfied!" he said.

"Number five," said Irene, "the first floor." She led the way up, and opened the door. "Look. The drawing-room."

"Why, this seems very nice!" said Mr. Jackson.

"Even pictures on the walls! Even a rug!" exclaimed Mrs. Jackson.

Oswald looked about him with the air of a connoisseur. He coyly pinched the arm of a chair. "It needs a little careful rearranging," he said, "and there ought to be some ash-trays."

Irene led them into one of the bedrooms. It contained a large bed, a wardrobe, a washhand-stand and a dressing-table.

"What more could you want?" cried Mrs. Jackson.

"There's no chamber," said Mr. Jackson, looking under the bed.

Irene threw back the bedclothes, and demonstrated the resilience of the mattress.

"Look! See how it bounces up and down!" she said. "You'll be able to sleep ever so well in this bed. And look—you only have to look out of the window, and you can see the Square. See the trees?"

"And where do I sleep?" asked Oswald.

"Here," said Irene, opening the door of another room, "there are two beds here. One for you, one for Alfred."

"What? Have I got to share a room with Alfred?"

"Well, why not? You've been sharing a bed with him ever since I can remember, and here you are, grumbling about having to share a room!"

"Well, we ought to have a screen," said Oswald.

"I'll buy you one," said Irene.

She took them to a tiny room at the end of the passage, furnished with a gas-stove, a table, a sink, a dresser, and chairs.

"Look, mother; the kitchen!"

"Now isn't that nice!" said Mrs. Jackson.

"A little cramped," said Oswald.

"I don't like the wallpaper," said his father.

"And where will you sleep?" asked Mrs. Jackson.

"Me? Well . . . I was thinking of . . . of taking a place on my own, so as to . . . to be nearer my office. . . ."

"Oh!"

"Ah!"

"Hum!"

"Well, what's the matter?" asked Irene.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," said Oswald, mournfully.

"Your office!" said Mr. Jackson. "Hm!"

They went back to the drawing-room. Mr. and Mrs. Jackson and Oswald stood awkwardly by Irene. They felt uneasy in the presence of the solid walls and the shiny furniture. They were vaguely afraid of the clean, blank atmosphere of the place. They missed the dampness, the smells, and the shabbiness. They were people of the attics, out of their environment. Their noses had grown too accustomed to the smells of cats, cabbage, and washing-days, which they had

learned to associate with their ideas of home; they sniffed suspiciously at the fresher air of the flat, as other people might have sniffed at an escape of gas. The prospect of living in this place thrilled and alarmed them.

"Well, shall I take the flat?" asked Irene.

"Yes, I think so," said Mr. Jackson.

"It's very nice. Too good to be true," said Mrs. Jackson.

"It will do for a start," said Oswald.

"Well, all right, mother. I'll see the landlord, and pay the rent in advance, and get you the key. It won't be available for another week or ten days," said Irene.

Oswald smiled ingratiatingly, and said, in a low voice:

"I've got a little proposition I'd like to put to you, Irene. A good thing, with tons of money in it. You know people smoke in cinemas and theatres?"

"Yes."

"Well, they throw away their cigarette-ends, don't they?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, millions and millions of these cigarette-ends are thrown away every day. Now say you went round to all the cinemas, and theatres, and so on, and bought up all the waste cigarette-ends that they'd otherwise throw in the dust-bin. You buy them for next to nothing, you see. Then you get people to unravel them, and mix up all the tobacco, and re-roll it into cigarettes. See? Then you send out travellers, and sell the cigarettes at ten for twopence—full-sized cigarettes, ten for twopence! Well, it's all profit. You pay twopence a pound for your cigarette-ends. You get at least two hundred and fifty cigarettes out of a pound of tobacco. Twenty-five packets of ten. Fifty pence. Four-and-twopence. Four shillings clear profit. There's a fortune in it! What do you say?"

"I'll think about it."

"We could call them 'Jackson's Golden Honey-Flake Cigarettes'. Sort out the Turkish cigarette-ends, and sell them at ten for fourpence—'Mustapha Jackson Sahib's Pure Turkish Cigarettes'. On the showcards, a picture of man in a

fez, saying: 'I mustapha Jackson Sahib's cigarette'—Mustapha, must-have-a; see? It——"

"I'll see. Well, father, what d'you think of the place?"

"It seems quite respectable," said Mr. Jackson. Then, the word reminding him of his grievance of the night before, he added, in a kind of lachrymose howl: "But oh, oh, Irene, Irene, better a meal of herbs and be decent and respected! My poor fallen daughter, if only you'd been and come by the money honestly!"

FASCINATION



BY sheer force of volume does the band in the Café of the Winds transcend the normal. You do not dance to its music; you are swept away on the torrent of it. Its harmonies beat at your head; its cacophonies blast you; its monotonies hypnotise you. In the clash of the cymbals and the deep rolling of the drums there is something of the primeval grandeur of the mastodon—an effect of impregnable dominance and shattering ferocity. By virtue of its size, this band can make the Saint Louis Blues sound like an African cataclysm, full of the voices of great wild beasts and the majestic thunder of falling trees, with undertones and overtones of shouting wind, pelt-ing water, and the crackling of branches licked by flame. It is beyond restraint. It shakes with red and black savagery. Listening, you are reminded of the shadowy beginnings of things; of the jungle and the sea. The stringed instruments and the accordions form a deep pool of harmony, in which the sweet notes of saxophones slide and swerve like large sleek fishes, and the shrill tremolos of trumpets wriggle and dart like eels. And always, at the base of everything, you are aware of the Tubaphone; apparent but not separately audible; a booming tonal blunderbuss; a tortuous tunnel of shimmering brass emitting sounds of unimaginable profundity. This is hot jazz; the directly-appealing, the universally comprehensible; immemorially ancient, and eternally recurrent—the beginning and the end of all music; the simple symbolism of the fundamental instincts; the rock from which all art has sprung, and to which all art will ultimately gravitate. *Pom-pom, pom-pom, pom-pom, pom-pom*—the old, raw rhythms reassert themselves. When forests sprout over the ruins of our machines, they will throb uninterrupted in the

twilight, just as they throbbed at the dawn of the Western world. And from these rhythms newer and mightier symphonies will evolve; until, at the high noon of another civilisation, the pulse of the jungle will again creep back through the chinks in its imperfect structure, heralding yet another retrocession into the shadow that for ever lies in wait.

The scat-singer throws back his head and cries to heaven in a hoarse agony. The drummer slumps over his bass-drum, trap-drums, cymbals, and cowbells; with a wire brush he tickles the straining parchment, producing a sibilant noise, like heavy breathing. . . .

"Roun' by her apron stri-i, i-i, i-ings—

Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh- . . ."

Round and round swirl the coupled dancers, like coffee-grounds on the surface of stirred coffee, until the screeching brake of the final chord slows them down, and the concluding cymbal-clash stops them dead.

At once, from the other end of the vast dance-floor, the subsidiary band continues. There is no rest. There is no peace. Everybody dances. There is fever in the air. Black barmen wave glittering cocktail-shakers in mad arcs; from the bulging necks of curiously-shaped bottles issue a thousand cataracts of coloured liqueur; champagne magnums fire out their iron-shod corks in a spouting welter of froth; *kssssssss!* go the eager syphons; and the tin crowns of beer-bottles clatter on the bar. In the midst of all this walks Henri Papagayo, the manager, cool and immaculate—a Shadrach, a salamander, an iceberg in a boiling sea!—he floats through the crowd, directing everything. He lifts a finger: silence falls; he speaks; he waves a hand, and—brouhaha!—chaos is come again. Bandsmen go raving mad—the yells of the singer tear his throat—a doorway coughs out a white stream of tarantula-bitten women with a handful of silk over their breasts—a tripped-up waiter stumbles, dropping a clangorous tray and a jingling yataganerie of knives and forks. . . .

Through the shrieking dancers, John Stone Mogador ploughs his way, leading Paula back to his table.

(2)

"I think," said Mogador, "that you've got more sex-appeal than any woman I've ever seen in my life!"

"You think so?" said Paula.

"I certainly do. Sex-appeal, that's the word. Mind you, you've got more than sex-appeal—you've got brains."

"You flatter me."

"I don't. I never flatter anybody, and that's a fact. No, there's no getting away from it, you've got both sex-appeal and brains."

"And which do you prefer?"

"Gee, well . . . I like both."

"But would you prefer a woman with a lot of sex-appeal and no brains, or a woman with a lot of brains and no sex-appeal?"

"Why, a woman with a lot of sex-appeal and no brains, if I had to choose between the two. It usually works that way. You have to choose either one thing or the other. Apart from some very exceptional cases, you hardly ever get the two combined."

"And when you do?"

"Well, when you do, Lord have mercy upon your soul! Sex-appeal can be dangerous enough in itself, without brains."

"So you must think me a very dangerous sort of person, then?" said Paula.

"I do! Have some more wine?"

"No thanks. And how about yourself? Aren't you dangerous, also?"

"Well . . . I've got money, and a certain amount of brains, of a certain kind. But sex-appeal? Have I got sex-appeal?"

"Haven't you? I think you have. Not that it inflames me to look at you, you know; but I should certainly say that you had sex-appeal. You aren't in the least handsome—your hair and teeth are the best parts of you, I think—but you look virile, and capable."

"Ha, ha, ha!" Mogador displayed his teeth, and laughing, bent forward to show the fine undulations of his rich brown hair—a gesture which Paula noted, with an inward grin. "So we both got sex-appeal, then?"

"Um-hum!"

"Then we're both pretty dangerous, I suppose?"

"Well, I don't know; it depends to whom. You're certainly not dangerous to me. And I don't suppose I'm in the least dangerous to you."

"Say, now don't be too sure of that! I think you're the most dangerous young woman I've ever met."

"Why? Are you afraid I might lead you astray, or something?"

"No. From what I've seen of you, you'd let me lead myself astray, and stand by—oh, well, anyway, what does that matter?"

"You speak about me as if I were some hard-boiled woman of forty, Mr. Mogador; whereas, I'm merely an unsophisticated girl in the early twenties."

"Ah, cut out the 'unsophisticated'! The most dangerous thing about you is, you've got the body and face of a young woman, and the mind of a . . . an experienced old woman of the world. I'll bet there isn't much you don't know!"

"You'd win your bet," said Paula; and accompanied this with her most ambiguous expression. "There *isn't* much I don't know—about certain things."

"Such as?" said Mogador, tentatively; but Paula did not reply. She merely smiled. Mogador was puzzled. He continued: "Well, I can't make head or tail of you!"

"Am I such a . . . defaced coin?"

"No, no. You . . . Say, listen. Do you know a lot about men, for instance?"

"A little."

"Have you ever been in love?"

"No. Have you?"

"Yes, I have. Then you don't know much about love?"

"Who said I don't? Do you imagine that just because I

haven't lost my head with a boy, I don't know anything about love? I know quite a lot about it."

"How can you?"

"You must realise, Mr. Mogador, that quite a lot of people have fallen in love with me."

"I'm not surprised."

"And you know how people behave when they're like that. If a girl takes care of herself, and doesn't throw herself away merely in order not to hurt people, she sees quite a lot. And then, you men are so obvious!"

"Some men are. Not all men are alike."

"Oh yes they are, when they want a certain woman. There are two or three ways in which they behave—no more. And they all become obvious, after a while. You men can't restrain yourselves! Honestly, men are so *ardent*!"

"Listen, Paula—when you start talking that way, so God-damn superior, I feel as if I'd like to put you across my knee and spank you!"

"But you know I'm right."

"Are you? Well, tell me, how do men behave, when they're in love with you?"

"I'll tell you. Either they try to win you by exciting you, if you let them get near enough. Or they try to overawe you by showing off their strength, their cleverness, or their property. Or they try to make you pity them by showing off all their weaknesses—making an appeal to your maternal instincts. There! There are one or two variations, but those are the principal ways of men with maids."

"You must be a fish! Say, it strikes me you'd be a hell of a person to please! What kind of men do you like, tell me!"

"Well, I haven't met many men I might have liked. You see . . . I'm not really a fish, Mr. Mogador. I'm not cold. I'm probably as hot-natured as anybody in the world. Only I'm a coward—I tell you frankly, I'm a *coward*! I'm afraid of liking anybody. I know that if I liked a man, I'd give him——"

She stopped abruptly. Mogador leaned towards her, and said, with breathless eagerness:

"You'd give him what?"

"Nothing. I don't know why I'm talking to you like this. I don't know. It must be the wine, or the heat, or the music! I just say—I'm a coward. If I find myself getting to like a man, I don't see him any more." *Hey, see his face getting red!* she said, to herself, *Oh, Mogador, Mogador, my pretty little millionaire! Another few strokes like this, and I've got you, I've got you!*—"Now, listen, Mr. Mogador——"

"Say, why not call me John?"

"Well, John. Don't give me any more wine. It seems to loosen my tongue. And don't let's talk about me any more. Let's dance——"

"Yes, yes, sure, certainly; we'll dance next number, provided it's not a Tango. But come on, come on! You're drinking nothing. Just a little more wine; champagne won't hurt you, it's non-alcoholic almost, honest to God! There!"

Paula took a few sips. Her head was cool, with the perfect coolness of utter sobriety. She felt the icy tenseness of an experienced duellist who has his finger on the trigger and his enemy over the sights. *A little abandon; now, let him have it—*. She turned her face upwards a little, and dilated her eyes so that they caught the light; allowed her mouth to relax, and stared steadily at Mogador.

Through the curved bottom of his glass, divided by a pringling surface of pale wine, Mogador saw her blazing eyes, and the lustful red cushion of her mouth. He paused, staring. The champagne-bubbles pricked his nostrils, and brought tears to his eyes; Paula's face seemed to swim and melt, like a face in a dream. Blood, gold, ivory, satin, and smouldering fire! He felt a curious sensation, as if something snarling and ferocious within him was bunching itself into a crouch, on the point of springing madly into the open. He set down his glass, blinked, and cautioned himself: *Steady! Steady! You're on the verge of falling—making a monkey out*

of yourself—for a silly little blonde! No, not silly—dangerous. Danger! Danger!

Nevertheless, he began to talk.

"You say you're scared of liking anybody. Now, why? Why should you be scared of anything? I've got a high opinion of you. Why tell me you're a coward? What are you afraid of?"

"Of being hurt," lied Paula.

"Then you don't live. You got to take on anything, with or without gloves on. Tackle life as it comes! What's the use of being afraid? You might as well close yourself up in a cellar, and live there all your life, if you're scared of getting hurt. You might as well not eat, in case you get indigestion. You might as well not cross the road, in case you get knocked down by a car. If I'd been scared of things, where'd I be now? You've got to take chances. Life is like that."

"Yes, I suppose you're right."

"I tell you, I've been through hell and back again; and there's nothing to be afraid of. Not a thing! What can hurt you? Nothing. You can only die, that's the worst thing that can happen. I've seen worlds going smash about my ears, and still not cared. Naked came I into this world. Whatever I leave it with is all profit. That's the way to look at it. I——"

"I'm not a coward, so much as cautious. You can say what you like, but I think that I'd be a fool, to throw away all my possibilities, just for the sake of a pleasant moment. The women who never consider the future sell their birthright for a mess of pottage——"

"All right, don't let's argue. I'm not here to argue. I came here to have a pleasant evening with you. I've been looking forward to seeing you all day. I put off an important conference, just so as to see you at seven o'clock, as you said. I've been thinking about you."

"What have you been thinking?"

"Just about you. I like you. I took a fancy to you the first minute I saw you. I said to myself, as soon as I set eyes on you: 'There's sex-appeal!' And afterward, I said: 'And

brains!' You're the sort of woman I'd like to have about me. You could go a long way. Tell me, what do you do for a living?"

"I don't do anything."

"Now listen. I like you. I want to . . . have a lot more to do with you. A girl like you could have a career——"

"As your secretary? If you were going to make me one of your secretarial offers, you needn't bother! When *I* sell myself, it'll be for a lot more than a few pounds a week."

Mogador paused. As a matter of fact, some such idea had crossed his mind. Like a good campaigner, he instantly adopted new tactics. He pulled, from the little finger of his left hand, a ring set with an enormous emerald, and smacked it down on the table, with an exclamation:

"Good! That's one up for you!"

"What on earth are you playing at?"

"I'm making you a present of that ring, as a token of my—um—er—admiration. Stick it on your finger. Emeralds suit you, being fair."

The ring slipped over Paula's forefinger. She looked at the jewel with well-concealed admiration, and said:

"It's an awfully nice emerald. But I'm afraid I can't accept it."

"Why not?"

"Well, in the first place, it's very valuable——"

"One thousand seven hundred and twenty-five pounds sterling; but you should worry!"

"And in the second place, how *can* I take it? You aren't offering it to me for nothing. What will you expect in return?—You see, I give you nothing but a square deal. Even if I took your emerald, I'd give you absolutely nothing in return——"

She took off the ring, and offered it to Mogador, who laughed.

"Keep it. I want you to have it. Can't I make you a present if I like?"

"Well, thank you." Paula replaced the ring on her forefinger.

"You like it?"

"I love it."

"I tell you what you can do."

"What?"

"You can say thank me with a nice kiss."

"I should like you to know," said Paula, "that I don't go about kissing men promiscuously. I told you I'd give you absolutely nothing in return. I'd have to like you quite a lot, before I kissed you."

"Ah, go on! I can't believe that. A kiss is nothing. One kiss; just one."

"Listen, Mr. Mogador—will you please take back this ring? I simply refuse to be under any kind of obligation, to anybody. I spoke to you quite frankly, and you still insisted on my taking it. And now you're trying to wriggle out——"

"Say, listen, I'm not trying to wriggle out of anything! By God, you make me mad sometimes! Put that ring on your finger again, and forget it!"

"No, please take it back."

"Listen, for the last time—put that ring on your finger, or I'll sling it right away into the middle of the floor, there, for anybody to pick up!"

Paula put the ring on the table.

"I'll count three," said Mogador.

"Well, go ahead."

"One——"

Paula smiled.

"Two——!"

Paula gazed at him, with mockery.

"Three!" Mogador picked up the ring; glanced at it; glanced at Paula; glanced at the packed mass of dancers, and then, with an angry gesture, threw the ring down again.

Paula put it on.

"Bluffer!" she said. "Now I'll have it. Catch *you* throwing it away!"

Mogador gulped. He wanted, for a moment, to smash her

face with his fist. Then a great admiration overcame him. He sighed, and said:

"By God! By God, what a woman you are! By God, I'm crazy about you! Let's get out of this. Let's go get some air. It's warm outside—it's a great night. What say we drive out somewhere, and smoke a cigarette in the open air?"

"I should love to," said Paula.

They went out.

(3)

The car shot out of London. Factories outlined in the shaky glare of neon tubes appeared and disappeared. A straight grey road unrolled itself, a ceremonial carpet leading to the courts of the night. In the faint light of the moon, the surface of the road was like graphite; but where the headlamps struck, one could see the wheel-scars of a million vehicles.

The smell of the fields arose—the cool scent of the earth forcing up its crops; the clean and fertile earth, straining in a labour of procreation; the vast, black, fruitful earth.

"On nights like this," said Mogador, "I sometimes feel I'd like to give up business, and go and live in the country."

"And keep chickens and pigs?" said Paula, lightly.

"You can do a lot worse," said Mogador, "and when you get to be my age, you'll realise that."

His hand, at this point, fell lightly on Paula's shoulder, but she seemed not to notice.

"Don't imagine that the Café of the Winds is my ideal of a place to live in," she said, "I'm not at all the hectic young woman that you seem to take me for. What I want, above all things, is a settled existence. I don't really like excitement. I prefer absolute security."

"Would you marry for security?"

"No. If I married for security alone, then my life wouldn't

be really secure. You can't have a safe marriage without a certain amount of love on both sides."

"What I want is security, also," said Mogador.

"What, haven't you got it?"

"Financially, yes. But . . . I can't quite get it into so many words——"

"Is it a sort of settled condition of mind that you want? Peace of mind?"

"Yup, that's it! Peace of mind. What you might call a permanent home; one woman. D'you know what?"

"What?"

"I'm crazy about you. Listen, why don't you try and be nice to me? I can give you everything. Furs, jewellery, money, dresses—God-damn it, I'd give you a yacht! Say listen, come with me to Sweden——"

"You don't seem to understand," said Paula, with an undertone of wistful tenderness, "that I have no intention of being a kept woman."

"How d'you mean? You want to work for your——"

"Heavens, no! I'm not cut out for work of any kind. And I wouldn't be much of a success as a mistress. Oh, I won't go into details, John. I shan't be seeing you any more, after to-night."

Mogador recollected Paula's remark in the Café of the Winds—"If I find myself getting to like a man, I don't see him any more." He pressed closer. Paula smiled to herself.

"Listen, Paula," said Mogador, in a tone which had conveyed to governments, presidents, and princes an impression of irresistible quiet force: "you *are* going to see me again. I like you, and you like me—and you know it! Look at me. Look me straight in the eyes, Paula, and tell me, with your hand on your heart, that you don't like me!"

Great big fool! thought Paula; but she said nothing.

Mogador's arms closed about her in a big, soft grip; it was like being hugged by a boneless bear. His face descended. He kissed her.

For one second, she resisted; then she became quiescent;

and finally, she returned his kiss, with a reluctance which merged into a mordant, hungry ferocity. It was a most remarkable simulation of awakened passion; in its way, a work of art.

She heard his unsteady respiration—the unmistakable *h-ha* . . . *h-ha* of a man who endeavours to control his breathing and appear calm. Her fingers, still pressed against his wrist in a restraining gesture, felt the rapid thudding of his pulse. She was sure, in that moment, that he was hers.

She tore herself away, and covered her face with her hands.

"Darling——" began Mogador.

But Paula, in a sad, sweet voice, interrupted:

"Take me back, now."

"But say, it's only eleven o'clock."

"Please, John, take me home now."

"And when am I to see you again?"

"Never again."

"Paula! To-morrow."

"No."

"The next day."

"No. My sister's getting married then. No, I'd better not see you any more."

"Friday? Saturday?"

"Well. . . ."

"Saturday?"

"Well . . . all right."

"For lunch."

"Very well."

"At the Bird of Paradise?"

"Very well. Now take me back."

"Back!" snapped Mogador, into the speaking-tube.

The car turned, and purred over the wide grey road, back to London.

Got you! thought Mogador; and his heart bounded at the thought.

Got you! thought Paula, and smiled to herself.

(4)

Three quarters of an hour later, Paula passed through the shop, and went upstairs to her room. Mrs. Barker was not yet in bed. She peeped out in her dressing-gown, and asked:

"Is that you, Paula?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Where've you been?"

"To a dance, with a boy. Why?"

"Nothing, only I hope you don't run about with common boys. Oh, you girls, you think you know best, and you won't be led or guided by your mothers that are older than yourselves, but allow me to tell you——"

"Oh, don't you worry about me."

Mrs. Barker took out her false teeth. She put them into a saucer of water, with an unmistakable *klik-klik*. Thereupon, her face collapsed, and she whistled as she talked:

"Yephss, itsss all very niphce to phsssay 'don't worry'——"

"Good-night, mother."

"Good-night."

Paula closed her door, and sat on the bed. She thought of Mogador. She looked at her lips in the mirror, and thoughtfully kissed the back of her hand. That Mogador-kiss, she decided, was the kiss of her career. It had been powerful, warm, sophisticated and full of restrained lubricity. She had surpassed herself. She undressed. Then she took out the emerald ring.

"One thousand seven hundred and twenty-five pounds sterling!" she said.

She held it to the light, and gazed at it for a long time.

"Poor old Irene, with her fifty-guinea silver fox!" murmured Paula.

She put the ring in her bag again, turned out the light, and, in due course, fell asleep.

MOGADOR THE MIGHTY



KNOWING only the social Mogador, you would have found it difficult to recognise him in his office. His joviality fell from him like a cloak. He seemed incapable of his characteristic smiles and gestures, and his rolling gong-like laughter. He hardened. He became a man of teak. His eyebrows drew together. His eyelids became tense. Through hard slits, the pupils of his eyes glinted like beads of onyx. His teeth were clenched; his upper lip pressed inwards; his jaw-muscles became prominent. Never for a moment did his mouth relax. His golden voice, reduced and hardened, came in a brittle mutter through a stony crack. You might have imagined his vocal apparatus as some contrivance of hammers and cold chisels, which snapped off and ejaculated case-hardened fragments of speech. The social Mogador could throw away thousands. The Mogador of the Finance Trust wasted nothing, not even a syllable. Time-savers from America abbreviate "All right" to "Okay"; but Mogador abbreviated "Okay" to "K!" He did not even say "Oke!" for that would have involved some wastage of energy, some unnecessary parting of the lips. He was purged of superfluity. He looked so hard that you would not have attempted to take the cigarette from between his lips without the help of a jemmy and a pair of pliers. Above this bullet-proof face, the soft warm mass of his hair appeared grotesquely incongruent. In places like the Café of the Winds, it seemed only right that a big-chested and smiling gentleman like Mogador should possess such a handsome and extravagant head of hair. The hair, like the dress-suit and the jewels, was appropriate to the social Mogador. It was, perhaps, a pity that he did not shave his head for business. As his face hardened, so his hair seemed to

sit uneasily above it, until it became, as I have said, grotesquely incongruent. It was as if an artist, with a half-hearted desire to relieve some intrinsic severity in a composition, had stuck a mob-cap on the head of a frowning gargyle.

Mogador's hair was a kind of barometer. If it looked natural, all well and good. If it looked artificial, then Mogador was brewing a typhoon—and woe, woe, woe betide the Stock-exchanges of the Western world!

To-day, the hair did not look like hair at all. It resembled a skull-cap. Mogador sat behind eight telephones. He read tape with the air of an executioner disembowelling the tape-machine for high treason.

His eyebrows descended even lower.

"Get Collins!" said Mogador.

A secretary ran away.

Suddenly, Mogador's offices began to seethe. The hasty babble of many voices and the noise of typewriters sounded like boiling water and crackling fire. Telephones rang like fire-alarms. Now and again, some convulsion threw up an agitated clerk, who scurried with slips of paper. Men darted with black files. District Messengers dashed in and slid on their heels through glass-and-chromium swing-doors, which thudded and oscillated incessantly.

"You told Garrett?" said Mogador.

"Yes," said Collins.

"K!"

Mogador watched the ribbon of paper creeping across his palm. . . .

Tickatick, tick-tick-tick. . . . Tickatick, tick-tick-tick. . . . Tickatick.

$45\frac{5}{8} \dots 45\frac{1}{2} \dots 45.$

Mogador snatched up a telephone.

"Olsen. Tell Arnott to keep at it till I say stop. Yup. K!"

Tickatick, tick-tick-tick. . . . Tickatick, tick-tick-tick. . . . Tickatick, tick-tick-tick. . . . Tickatick.

$44\frac{7}{8} \dots 44\frac{5}{8} \dots 44\frac{1}{4} \dots 44.$

Mogador lit another cigarette.

"Collins. Get Baum—tellum hold on—and Hollyman, Boomer, 'n Thomas. Snappy!"

Tickatick, tick-tick-tick. . . . Tickatick.

44½. . . . 44.

"Mike—tell Talmadge I said to pass the word. Get Verne, Paris—tellum *hold*, tooth 'n nail. Get Bassakyros, Marseilles—tellum I said to unload. Jump!"

Tickatick. . . . Tickatick, tick-tick-tick. . . . Tickatick, tick-tick-tick. . . . Tickatick.

44. . . . 44½. . . . 44¾. . . . 45.

"Hah!" said Mogador. For the moment, he seemed content. He knocked ash into the tape-basket, and rested for as long as it takes a man to sneeze. Then——

Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick. . . . Tickatick. . . . tickatick, tick-tick-tick. . . . Tickatick. . . . Tickatick, tick-tick-tick. . . . Tickatick.

BOO TIM. . . . 78. . . . 72½. . . . 77. . . . 76½. . . . 76.

"Holy Jesus! Collins—Get Berks; ask him what he's waiting for. Get Sjöberg, Copenhagen—tellum get in touch Nordholm, 'mediately!"

Tickatick . . . tickatick . . . tickatick . . .

75. . . . 75. . . . 74.

Mogador laughed—one exhalation:

"Huh! Just like that, eh? Mike, get me Faber."

Tickatick, tick-tick-tick. . . . Tickatick.

73½. . . . 73.

"Gimme 'phone. . . . 'Lo, Faber? Mogador. You holding number eight? Nup. Leggo now. Yup, now. K. Bye. . . . I'll show um!"

Tick, tick, tick. . . . Tickatick, tick-tick-tick . . . tickatick . . . tickatick . . . tickatick.

O-D-L. . . . 15¼. . . . 15. . . . 14½. . . . 13.

"Aha! Yup, gimme 'phone! 'Lo, Hope? Mogador. Yup, now! Throw in. Yup. Yup. K. Bye. . . . Hey, Collins! Get Budapest, Horthy—lem drop like hot bricks. Get Belgrade. Tell Lazareff watch Danube Timber—cat-mouse, see? Yup—get! What? Who? Miss Irene Jackson wants

see me? Teller go hell—no, teller wait. Now, Mike; watch this——”

Tickatick . . . tickatick . . . tickatick.

12. . . . 11. . . . 10.

“Get an eyeful! Hah! Parker, get Athens, Papadoupolos. Tellum hold Phosphorous. Quick! Whassat? Thorne? Gimme 'phone. . . . 'Lo Thorne? Mogador. Yup, it's a fact—it'll be on sale to-day. Yup, get it. Raise loan—see Keith; I wired Keith. Yup, Eisener got contract for Sarajevo Tunnel props. Timber, timber, I'll show um timber! Yup. K! Bye——”

Tick, tick, tick. . . . Tick. . . . Tick——

O-D-L. . . . 9. . . . 8.

“Hah!” exclaimed Mogador.

Tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . tick.

7. . . . 6. . . . 5. . . . 5. . . . 4. . . .

“Hyuh!” Mogador's hair began to look natural again. He opened his cigarette-case, and took out the last cigarette. “See that, Mike? See that, Collins? Gimme a light. Collins send me a boy round to Stoloff's, in Pall Mall—hey, son! You'll do. Take this pound note. Go to Stoloff's the tobacconists, in Pall Mall, and tell him to give you a tin of Mr. Mogador's specials. That pound's for a taxi—taxi there, taxi back—be more than twenty minutes, and you're fired. Well——”

Tick . . . tick . . . tick.

3. . . . 2. . . . 1.

“God!” exclaimed Collins.

“Phew!” gasped Mike, wiping his face.

Mogador smiled. He sat back. The tape-machine ceased to interest him. He said, in a tone of grim satisfaction:

“What you think of that?”

“Well, Mr. Mogador, I bet there's not another man in the world who could have done what you've done this morning!” said the secretary called Mike. “It smashes them to smithereens!”

“Ah,” said Mogador, “send in Miss Tuson.”

A girl came in.

"Miss Tuson," said Mogador, "what d'you think I placed you in this department for?"

"Well . . . why . . ."

"No, not well why! I placed you in this department in order to have you file letters efficiently. Mr. Richardson tells me the letter from Kallikratides, dated May 28th, was placed out of order, before his letter of May 25th. Anything to say?"

"I——"

"You're fired."

Miss Tuson went out.

The boy returned with a tin of cigarettes. Gasping for breath, he placed them on Mogador's desk, together with a ten-shilling note and some silver.

"How long were you?" said Mogador, looking at his watch, "Eighteen minutes. Lucky for you, son! If you'd been twenty-one minutes, I'd of fired you as sure as God made Heaven. I'll have no inaccuracy here. What's this? Fourteen shillings change? How d'you make that?"

"Please sir—taxi-fare, two-and-six each way, and a shilling for the driver."

"Who told you to give a shilling to the driver?"

"But I thought——"

"What wages d'you get?"

"Thirty-five shillings a week, sir."

"This week you get thirty-four."

"Yes sir."

"Go now and think yourself lucky."

"Yes sir."

Collins approached.

"Oh, Mr. Mogador—d'you want to see Miss Jackson, now?"

"Miss Jackson?" said Mogador, "No, wait. Put her through on Extension 5. I'll talk to her over the 'phone. Here—have a cigarette. They cost me two shillings each."

Collins put the cigarette in his case; it was too sacred to smoke. He went out. A minute later, the telephone rang.

"Hallo," said Mogador, "Irene? Ah, this is Mogador. Want to tell you something. You're fired. . . . What's that? Yes, I said fired. F—I—R—E—D. F for Fed-up; I for Irene; R for Rose-buds; E for Everlasting; D for Damnation—Fired. Can't you understand English? What's the matter? I employed you as my secretary. . . . What's that? *More* than a secretary? *What the hell!* I'm sending you a cheque; take it or leave it. . . . Say, listen. You were employed as my secretary. Were you or were you not? K. You were paid lavish. Were you or were you not? K. Now you're dismissed. I have no further need of your services. I'm sending you a cheque. What are you crying about? Yup, too bad! Cut it out, you're breaking my heart. K. Bye."

Mogador rang off. He fumbled in his breast pocket. A cheque-book flapped on the desk.

"Here, Mike," said Mogador, "my personal cheque for two hundred pounds. Mail it to Irene Jackson at once. I'm not in if she calls. Oh, and Collins—who's that telephone operator of ours?"

"Miss Perkins."

"She's got a funny voice—blasts right into the telephone. Hurts my ears. Tell her to pipe down a little. If I have to complain once more, fire her. K?"

"Sir."

"K."

Mogador's hair looked perfectly natural.

His staff breathed again.

Mogador puffed out a long, blue, fragrant cloud of smoke. He shook his head. For the benefit of the hard-boiled Collins, he made philosophy:

"Well, well, well; what fools women are!"

(2)

And Irene, having bathed her red eyes in cold water, hurried back to Turners Green. She was enraged; she burned with

humiliation. She clattered upstairs, and burst into the living-room.

Then she saw what was happening, and her anger gave place to terror.

Her parents, assisted by Oswald, were packing.

A large trunk, dragged from under a bed, and carefully dusted, was already half full. Oswald was folding a shirt, with tender care. Mrs. Jackson was filling a cardboard attaché-case with her own particular treasures—her marriage certificate, in a leather wallet; six fish-knives of worn plate; a tobacco-box, containing a row of jet beads and a chipped ivory crucifix; a butter-dish made from a scallop-shell; a sauce-boat of silver, as thin as tissue-paper; and a little fat book with red covers—that mine of curious gynæcological misinformation known as “Aristotle’s Works”.

Mr. Jackson was holding a sock by the extreme end of the toe, and crying, in a voice expressive of utter desolation:

“Oh, why is this sock odd? Oh, why is every single one of my socks odd? Oh, why is it that I can never find a whole pair of socks that isn’t odd? I’m not a fussy man. I don’t ask much. I only ask somebody to tell me, *why is this sock odd?*”

“Never mind, dear, you’ll soon have plenty of nice new ones,” said Mrs. Jackson.

Irene coughed.

“Why, Irene!” exclaimed Oswald, fulsomely, “why, hallo, Irene! Just in time to give us a hand with the packing!”

“You’d——” began Irene; but the words stuck in her throat.

“What’s the matter?” asked Mrs. Jackson.

“I——” Irene choked. Tears came into her eyes.

“Are you ill?” asked Oswald.

Irene paused. She observed their startled glances. She was about to say: “Mogador’s given me the sack”; but her pride revolted. She gulped, and said:

“I’ve left Mogador.”

Mr. Jackson’s mouth opened, as if an invisible hand had clutched him by the throat. Oswald blinked, as if an invisible

sandbag had struck him on the head. There was a brief silence.

"You've *what*?" asked Oswald.

"You've——?" Mr. Jackson twiddled his fingers. "You've——?"

"Well!" cried Irene, "You kept on nagging me, and making my life a misery, about being a bad girl, and an immoral woman, and saying things about coming by the money honestly . . . so I left him! See? Well? I've got my feelings, just the same as anybody else!" She burst into tears.

"You left Mogador!" cried Mr. Jackson. "You wicked girl! You selfish creature! All you think of is your own self—not your family, not your own flesh and blood, what went and blooming well breathed the breath of life into you!—only your own blinking self! Oh! Oh! what's going to become of us now? Oh God! Oh my goodness gracious! Oh!"

Oswald began to shout, at the top of his voice:

"Of all the selfishness! Of all the cheek! Of all the blessed common behaviour! To-to-to go and desert your family, eh? Just because of-of-of. . . . Ooo! Ooo! Well? What are we going to do? Starve to death? Die? Go round the streets with a-a-a barrel-organ? What's the idea? What——"

"Oswald, be quiet!" cried Mrs. Jackson.

"It serves you right!" cried Irene, "Making my life a misery!"

"What are we to *do*?" wailed Mr. Jackson, "Oh God, what are we to *do*? Oh, one of these days, I tell you, one of these here days, may I never move off this spot where I'm standing if I don't go and end it all! Oh, what've I got to *live* for? Oh, gimme a knife! Gimme a knife!"

"What am I going to do?" cried Oswald. "After you promised, to help me with my scheme—after you *promised faithfully* to help me. . . . Look——" He took from his pocket a wad of cards, and threw them to Irene.

She picked them up automatically. They were visiting-cards, printed as follows:

OSWALD JACKSON ESQUIRE

MERCHANT

MANUFACTURER

"Mother Jackson's Syrup"

"Dr. Jackson's 'Frutsalt' "

"Prof. Jackson's 'Fixo' "

Job Lines Bought

Represented by:.....

"I would have made a fortune—and now you've been and ruined everything!"

"Well, after all, dear, Irene didn't do wrong——" began Mrs. Jackson; but her husband interrupted her with a howl:

"There you go again! Going against me, your own husband, what bore you! What married you, I mean. Encouraging her! It only shows you—you're a blinking sight worse than she is—and you her own mother what ought to go and set an example to her. Ohooo! Gimme a knife! I'll take spirits of salt, I will, and do away with myself!"

"Oh, I'm fed up—I'm fed *up*!" cried Irene. She ran out of the room and went downstairs. She found Edna in the shop-parlour. Edna received her with maternal affection, and took her to her bosom.

"There, there," said Edna, "don't cry. They're not worth it. Ssh! Ssh! There, there..."

"One of these days," said Irene, "I'm going to run away from everything . . . just go away to some quiet place, miles away from everything. . . ."

"Ssh, ssh!"

Irene's grief broke out afresh:

"Oh . . . it—it's all very well for you, Edna . . . you're go-go-ing to be married to-morrow, and you'll b-be way from all this. . . . But me, I'm here, I'm chained down here, and I ca-can't escape. Oh . . . how lovely it must be to g-get

married to a nice steady boy like Mum-mister Todd! . . .
Oh, Edna, Edna, you d-don't know what *beasts* men are!"

"Ssh! Don't cry!"

"All men are beasts! Oh, ho-oh-oh-oh-oh!"

THE WAGES OF SIN AND THE WAGES OF VIRTUE



WHILE Edna, on her wedding morning, awoke at five o'clock in a state of intense excitement, Florrie Oxborrow emerged from her sleep to a sick depression born of prolonged anxiety.

She awoke at seven o'clock. She lingered, for a few seconds, between oblivion and consciousness. Then Worry, which had waited patiently, whetting its blunt cold claws during the eight-hour duration of her sleep, reached down and took possession of her.

She remembered something, and bit her lip. This was one of those days which ladies mark, on their diaries, with a little cross. She hesitated. Her heart raced. One look would tell her the worst; but she was afraid to look. Her imagination intimated that all was well. Her heart warned her that all was not well. She prayed:

"Oh God, please let it be all right, and I swear never to be wicked again."

Hope surged up. She leapt out of bed, and investigated.

There was nothing. She said to herself: "What a fool I am, to keep on hoping!"

In many cases, hope is a kind of insanity. When it gains predominance, reason automatically goes out of action. Unwilling mothers are the classic examples of this. They have performed the essential biological preliminaries, without precaution. The first dreaded sign appears—that is to say, a periodic affliction becomes conspicuously absent. They say: "Perhaps it will be a little late." A month passes. They say: "Well, lots of people sometimes miss a month." The more they have heard or read about the matter, the more they

deceive themselves—they hasten to imagine themselves analogous to every exceptional case since Eve. Finally, after two or three months, they find themselves forced to the conclusion that they are really and truly pregnant.

But Florrie, after two months, having nobody to comfort her with false reassurance, began to accept the terrifying fact. She sat on the edge of the bed. Her mind, like a panic-stricken animal, began to dash into the blind-alleys of conjecture.

She took off her night-dress, and looked at herself in the mirror. Freed from the restraining grip of hope, her imagination swung away: she could see herself growing momentarily larger and larger. She placed a trembling hand on her stomach, half expecting to feel something stirring.

"Well!" she said, with a sigh. "What is to be will be——"

But even as she said this, a wan hope began to flicker feebly at the back of her mind. She had a dim recollection of a casual remark, heard long before, and half buried in a mass of more vivid and recent memories: "So I had a *very hot bath*, and that brought me on . . ."

She went to the bath-room, and put four pennies in the gas-meter. The gas-ring in the geyser banged; water poured, steaming, out of the nozzle. The bath half-filled. She tried the water with her hand—it seemed to be near boiling-point. She timidly added a little cold water, and then stood in the bath. With a kind of suicidal impulsiveness, she let herself fall backwards into the water.

Tears ran down her cheeks. She bit her lip, and writhed. She threw back her head, and grimaced at the steamy ceiling. Something revolved, buzzing, in her head. She clutched at the edges of the bath, weeping with pain. Then an idea came to console her: "This is sure to work; something *must* happen, because it hurts so much!"

Soon, the water cooled, and she climbed out of the bath. She groped giddily for a chair, and sat down. The hot water had drawn out all her energy; she wanted to lie down and sleep.

She looked, eagerly, for results.

There was nothing.

"Perhaps later," she told herself.

She went to the office. Four times during the day, illusory sensations sent her flying to a private place.

But still there was nothing.

Horror came down upon her: then awe at the calm and terrific processes of nature; the remorseless advance of the embryonic development, the irreversible mechanism of gestation.

Now, the commonplace phraseology of the letters she typed, seemed to mock her with a sniggering, ribald symbolism——

Messrs. Wilson & Co., Ltd.,

Londonderry House,

Blackburn, Lancs.

Dear Sirs,

With reference to your inquiry of the 4th, inst., we regret to inform you that we shall be unable to deliver the goods before July 9th, on which date we can guarantee complete delivery of the entire consignment without further delay. We trust, however . . .

She shivered, on the edge of panic.

At the back of her terror, a species of grudging reverence strove to express itself——

Another life, separate and distinct from my own! . . . Another human being, growing and growing, and getting more and more alive! . . . Nothing I can do can stop it—it goes on and on. . . . Whether I like it or not, I've got to protect it with all my strength, all my muscles, and all my bones. . . . If I eat, I feed it; I make it stronger with every breath I draw. How terrible! How marvellous!——

"——But what am I to do?" Florrie asked herself, "What am I going to do? . . . Oh, God, please! I've been a little bit wicked, perhaps, but I've always said my prayers, and——oh, tell me, what am I going to do?"

She glanced upwards, but from the heavens there came no answer. She looked at the clock. It was half-past three; the day refused to pass. Time had congealed. Everything had stopped. She felt that she had been striking the keys of a typewriter since the beginning of the world. . . .

But all painful things pass away. Five o'clock struck, and the day ended; and Florrie hastened to Turners Green, to drink Edna's health and wish her happiness.

(2)

Edna was married. She was, in many ways, extremely fortunate. It is just as well, girls, to lose your virginity immediately before your honeymoon; if you can manage to do so without losing your prospective husband. The prolonged marital preparations, and the constant dwelling upon the awful mysteries of the marriage-bed, give rise to great illusions, great expectations, and great disappointments. The bridal night is a grossly overrated affair—a fumbling, foolish business, more often than not; painful to the female, and humiliating to the male. The nerve-racking ritual of the marriage ceremony brings about an atmosphere of tension, and sacrifice. The woman becomes a martyr; the man does not know quite how to proceed, without giving offence. Very frequently, the emotions of the husband have been strung to such a pitch that he becomes completely impotent, for the time being, and wants to be sick. Seventy per cent of marriages are not consummated in the first three days. Honeymoons are ghastly travesties—small wonder that honeymoon couples shun the light of day, and cannot look their fellow creatures in the face! To the Devil with all this white gauze, this grim solemnity, this veiling and titivating, this flounced file of giggling maidens, this hysteria, this dropping of crocodile-tears by mothers who are only too glad to get their daughters safely provided for, this salacious tittering of marriage-guests, this cutting of cake, this furtive flying-by-

night—all this morbid cluster of mysteries which helps to turn the marriage-bed into a gridiron of squirming shame!

The worst was over. Edna was married to Todd. The breakfast was eaten. The happy couple was about to fly away to some connubial eiderdown in a seaside hotel.

Todd, it must be admitted, looked well in his black jacket and striped trousers. A white slip beneath his waistcoat gave him an air of distinction. His shoes, it is pleasant to record, were of willow calf, not patent leather. He chatted pleasantly with the guests, and appeared to be quite at his ease.

His uncle Fred buttonholed him. "Bit sudden, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes. We just sort of decided to get married, and so we got married," explained Todd, blushing, "I don't believe in these long engagements. Besides, I was due to take my holiday early this year, and it fitted in nicely."

"She's a very nice girl," said Uncle Fred, "and you couldn't have done better. I wish you all the happiness in the world!" He went over to where Aunt Margaret was sitting, and whispered: "Ah! I said 'Bit sudden', just like that; and you should have seen his face! He went as red as fire, just like a tomato. Didn't know which way to turn. You were right, Marge, you were right! Well, I didn't think he had it in him. There you are, you see. These quiet ones."

Mrs. Socket complained to Mrs. Clark:

"D'you notice the way he goes about? Just like nothing had of happened. Look—see the way he's eating that grape! Just like he was a guest, or somethink. It's unnatural. Why, when I was married, my hubby didn't know which way to turn, and rightly so. You mark my words, my dear; I can read him like a book. He's no good."

"He was seen coming out of the 'Blue Lion'," said Mrs. Clark.

"The 'Blue Lion'?"

"As sure as I sit here!"

"There! You see?"

Mrs. Barker's sister said, to her husband:

"There's more in this than meets the eye!"

Mrs. Haggerty, from across the road, remarked to her daughter:

"If you ask me, that there dress of hers was made loose on purpose."

"I heard she was sick the other day," said Mrs. Bywaters, the wife of the greengrocer, "and I'm not telling you a word of a lie, but she came into our shop yesterday, and asked for peaches. Peaches! So I said to her, I said: 'What you want peaches for, lovey?'; so she says: 'I just fancied one'—just like that. She *fancied* one. Well, Mrs. Jones, far be it from me to cast aspersions; but you know and I know what it is when you start fancying things."

"Ah!"

Mrs. Barker wept. She had wept all day. She had nothing to say. She simply wept.

"Come now," said Mrs. Socket, "cheer up, my dear."

"You lose a daughter but you gain a son," said Mrs. Clark.

"It happens to all of us, sometime or other," said Mrs. Haggerty.

"After all, you still got your Paula, and your Douglas," whispered Mrs. Jackson.

The atmosphere became funereal.

"I don't know what I shall do without her!" cried Mrs. Barker.

"Mother, mother!" sobbed Edna. "Don't!"

"I can't help my feelings," said Mrs. Barker.

"She'll come and see you quite often," said Todd, "and you'll come and see us, too."

As he said this, his heart sank a little.

Douglas had remained silent for a long time. He had stared gloomily at everything. He had, also, drunk five glasses of port. Now, he emerged from his silence, and began to talk to Florrie:

"All this . . . merrymaking. I can't join in."

"Why not?" asked Florrie.

"*Herk!*—I beg your pardon. I've got sorrows. Secret

sorrows eating away my heart. You wouldn't understand. You don't know what love is. Do have a little port?"

"No thanks."

"Then . . . I will if you . . . don't mind. Good Health! *Herk!*—I beg your pardon; the cake disagreed with me. I never did like ceddin'-wake, not other people's ceddin' . . . wedding-cake. Got it that time! Wedding-cake. If you ever loved a woman, you would understand. But you can't. No woman can lu-love a woman, so no woman can under-*herk!*"

"Don't you think you ought to lie down?"

"Die down and lie. Die—lie down and die. Life means nothing to me. If I was mental she'd love me a little. If I had a withered leg, she would learn to care. If I had money to start a home for hanimals, hack—sack—sick animals——"

"Don't you think you ought to go and drink some water?"

"I'm all right. *Herk!* The duck disagreed with me, the dedding wuck—duck, wedding duck was what I meant to say. You don't know. Nobody could care, not really. . . . *Herk!* False man, that's me. Traitor. I swore I'd turn vegetari—*herk!*—vege—vege——"

"Vegetarian? Well, excuse me——"

"Don't go! Florrie, don't leave me! You're the only woman who really under—*herk!* What was I saying?"

"Vegetarian?"

"Yes, and I ate duck! Poor little fluffy duck. Plittle duffy fluck—er-*herk!* I beg your pardon. Cruelty to animals. Traitor, I am. Might have been flying about, and laying—duck eggs. Eggs! Notterbe tolerated—*burp!* Fluffy duck. Oh, fluffy duck!" cried Douglas, in tears, attracting the attention of all the guests: "Oh, poor little fluffy duck——"

"Take him outside and make him stick his finger down his throat," said Mrs. Socket.

"I'd chuck a bucket of water over 'im," suggested Mrs. Clark.

"Water!" bellowed Douglas. "Poor little fluffy duck in the water—poor fluffy duck, farting about among the dishes——"

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Barker.

"Darting about among the fishes!" cried Douglas, "And it'll never, never, never, never, never . . . *Erhooc* . . . *Erhooc*——"

He was led out into the passage.

(3)

Edna and Todd got into their taxi, in a twinkling downpour of confetti.

"Invite us to the christening!" cried Mrs. Socket.

"May all your troubles be little ones!" shouted Uncle Fred.

Mrs. Barker's brother-in-law threw an old shoe. Too much wine had spoiled his aim, but his enthusiasm was such that he succeeded in knocking the pipe from the mouth of a gentleman thirty feet away.

Douglas appeared, green in the face, and said:

"It was the duck."

The taxi jerked away.

"Darling," said Edna, "are you happy?"

"Who, me?"

"Are you?"

"Oh yes, thanks."

"Are you sorry?"

"Eh? Nono, nono!"

"Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"Eh? Why, of course!"

And as Todd bent sideways to take her in his arms, a severe little voice within him said:

"Ha! And let that be a lesson to you!"

THE PARABLE OF THE WINE



"AND so they went away to Brighton for ten days, and when they come back, they'll settle down and live happily ever after," said Paula; "and have children—a boy and a girl, let us say—and so carry on the good work."

"There's something to be said for it," said Mogador.

"What, domesticity?"

"Yes. It's ideal, for most people."

"But it wouldn't suit you, surely?"

"No, not me. I'm different." Mogador spoke with a kind of grim recklessness: "Me, I've always aimed above that kind of thing. A short life and a merry one!"

"Well, I must say that you don't look as if you're enjoying it, at the moment. What's the matter? Have you been working too hard?"

There was, in fact, something about Mogador's face which indicated insomnia, and nervous strain. It was as if cigarette-ash had been rubbed into the pink texture of his cheeks.

"Yes," he said, "I have. I've been on the go day and night. When did I see you last? Tuesday. Since Wednesday night, I've been to Paris, Berlin, Copenhagen, and back. Now, I feel a bit tired."

"Then you ought to go straight home and have a rest," said Paula, "instead of sitting here with me."

"I've been looking forward to seeing you," said Mogador. "You're getting to be an obsession with me. I've fallen for you."

Paula did not reply. The music of the Tsigane band filled the restaurant. A man sang, in a mournful baritone; the drawling cadences of his song were cut by the ringing chords of the zimbalon, and pierced through and through by the

sweet piping notes of the syrinx. The leader, in an embroidered blouse, swayed to and fro, as if drunk with the melody.

"I want to talk to you," said Mogador.

"Yes?"

"I'm not a man that beats about the bush. I like to get things straight once and for all. I like to know how things stand, one way or another. I like to play to win or lose—all or nothing. I never play for the fun of the game, or fight just for the love of fighting. That sort of thing is all right for those that like it. I don't. If I see a thing, and I want it, I try and get it. If I set my heart on a thing, I don't care what it costs me. See?"

"Well?"

"Here am I; here are you. You're a woman; I'm a man. It's funny, the way things work out. I've come in contact with the best-looking women in the world, and not gone out of my way to chase them. Whenever I've wanted a woman, I've bought her. If there would have been any particular one that I fancied more than another, I wouldn't have cared how much she cost me; but there hasn't been."

"But you told me you'd fallen in love, once."

"That was a long time ago, over twenty years ago, when I first started to go after big business."

"And——"

"Well!" said Mogador, with something like a snarl, "I told you if I set my heart on a thing I don't care what it costs me. I set my heart on big money. That was one of the things it cost me. Well? What I pay, I don't begrudge; I'm like that. See?"

There was an undertone of desperation and ferocity in Mogador's voice. To her astonishment, Paula could find nothing to say. He continued:

"Sob-stuff, that's all right for other people. Nobody ever got any sentiment out of me. Whatever you get, you pay for. I paid for money with a woman. I never regretted it. I set my heart on money. All right. Now, I've set my heart on a woman—you." The social Mogador began to slip away. His face began to harden. Down came his eyebrows; up crept

his chin, and his lips pressed out of sight; and above, startlingly misplaced, lay the soft brown undulations of his hair. His hand reached across the table, and closed on Paula's in a hard, knotty grip.

It was more than a change of front—it was palingenesis; an abrupt hardening of the very substance of the man.

But Paula had recovered her self-possession. She pulled away her hand, and said:

"You make that very noticeable, I must say. Well, what do you want me to do about it?"

Mogador relaxed again.

"Listen, Paula," he said, "tell me straight—what's your attitude towards me?"

"Well . . . if you had known me longer, you'd be able to see for yourself. It must be difficult for you to judge, because you've seen so little of me. But if you insist on my putting it into so many words—I like you quite a lot."

"I guessed that you did," said Mogador.

"*Oh, you did, did you?*" thought Paula.

"Now listen," said Mogador, "I'm a rich man. I could give you anything you wanted—absolutely anything! You'd only have to say: 'John, give me a yacht,' and I'd give you a yacht. You'd only have to say: 'Build me a palace,' and I'd build you a palace. You say you like me quite a lot?"

"Yes, quite a bit."

"Well, in view of all I've just said, do you think you like me well enough to come and live with me?"

For an imperceptible fraction of a second, Paula hesitated; then her instinct cried: *No! No! Play for the very maximum—you must win*—And she replied, calmly:

"No."

"What?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not a prostitute. I'm not to be bought——"

"You mean to tell me that it's only the moral side of it that stops you?"

"Well . . . partly."

"Only partly. What else is there? Are you keen on somebody else?"

"Good heavens, no! I think I like you better than anybody else I know."

"Then what is it? Are you concerned with what people might say?"

"Well, yes; to a certain extent."

"The moral side, partly; what people might say, a certain extent. What else is there?"

"Well . . . it's difficult to explain, John. It's a sort of—I don't quite know how to put it—a sort of mental attitude. The idea of being a kept woman is simply repulsive to me. There's so much inconvenience attached to it. And then again, I like to feel secure. I wouldn't just live with any man."

Mogador eyed her closely.

"Listen," he said, after a pause, "this'll show you just how much I'm crazy about you. D'you think you'd marry me?"

"Marry——" Paula had been expecting this; but she could not restrain a gasp—a gasp of triumph.

"Yup. Would you?"

"Well . . . I don't know . . ."

"Listen, Paula. I told you I go all out after what I set my heart on; but I don't jump at the moon. If you will, good. If you won't, I shan't die of a broken heart. But I want you to. Give me a final answer, yes or no."

"Well . . . yes. I think we'd get on awfully well together."

"You will?"

"Yes."

"No going back on that?"

"No, I mean it."

"Then we'll drink on that!"

They drank. As Mogador set down his glass, an inspiration seemed to strike him. He uttered an exclamation:

"Ah! *Now's* the occasion! We'll drink to this with my bottle of Zoltany wine—the rarest wine in the world. Let's go to my flat and open it."

"Very good; I'd love to!"

"Come on, then."

They left the restaurant. The chauffeur flung open the door of the car. As Paula got in, Mogador said, abruptly:

"Say, Stevens, did you notice a man hanging around?"

"What kind of man, sir?" asked the chauffeur.

"A little fat feller, in a soft grey hat."

"No, sir."

"K. Home."

The door slammed, and the car moved away.

Mogador led Paula into the lounge.

"What d'you think of it?" he asked.

"I think it's marvellous!"

"Yup. I hate antique stuff. I like this modern stuff; it's slick, and hard-wearing, with no knobs and sentimental nonsense about it. You know who did my decorations? Ossinin. I brought him over from France especially; I paid him two thousand pounds. I had the furniture made by Brujon. This carpet was specially woven, to give the right effect, or something. Think you're going to like it?"

"I'm going to love it."

"Good. If we get married a week from now, that'll be long enough to wait, won't it?"

"A week?"

"Sure. Now we know how we stand, what's the point in dillying and dallying?"

"Very well, then."

"That's fixed, then. To-day a week, for certain."

"You are an impatient man, aren't you?"

"Listen, baby," said Mogador, with a grim smile, "has it never occurred to you that life is short?"

"Well," said Paula, "I suppose you're right. But there's one thing I want to discuss with you."

"What's that?"

"You're a business-man, aren't you? And you believe in doing things in a business-like way, don't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, let's get married in a business-like way. I want a marriage-settlement."

"You want what?"

"I want you to settle some money on me, if I'm to be your wife. I hate the idea of a wife having to depend on her husband for everything."

Mogador grinned, showing his gleaming teeth.

"You're a little devil, aren't you? Marriage-settlement, eh? Well, why not?" He took out a notebook. "Finance Trust shares are paying seven per cent. Balkan Land is paying six per cent, and still rising. Mogador Mines are paying five per cent, and about to boom high. Mogador Rubies are worth fifteen pounds apiece. Mogador Banks go at forty dollars. Take your choice."

Paula actually cried out with excitement:

"Oh, John! Give me a lot of them! Do it quickly! I'm dying to see what it feels like, to have a lot of money!"

"Lot of money is right. These are my own shares, and worth their weight in gold. I'd rather have these than bank-notes, honest to God!" He scrutinised the notebook, and began to scribble figures, muttering: "One thousand . . . five . . . fifteen; six and a half, um, er. . . . Say, listen Paula: one thousand Finance Trust, two thousand Balkan Land, one thousand Mogador Mines, and one thousand Mogador Rubies. What d'you say to that? There's an allotment of shares! And the public running wild to get 'em!"

"Are they worth much?" asked Paula.

"Altogether? Say, do you know what capital they represent? Over fifty thousand pounds sterling! You could sell them to-morrow for fifty thousand pounds! Only you'd be a fool to do so, because they bring in an annual income of at least three thousand pounds, just as they stand."

"Fifty thousand pounds! Three thousand a year! And are they all for me?"

"Every single one! I told you I don't care what I pay, once I've set my heart on a thing. Now before I have the man

bring in the wine, don't you think I deserve one little kiss?"

Paula kissed him. He clutched at her, with unsteady hands, murmuring:

"Oh boy, oh boy, I'd give a lot to know where you learned to kiss like that!"

"And now let's taste that wine, shall we?"

"Sure!" Mogador pressed a button. A white-coated Japanese appeared like a ghost. "Get that old bottle of wine, Kato, and make it snappy."

Mogador produced glasses, and set them on a table.

"Genuine Spezzatino glass," he remarked. "A feller called Spezzatino makes them, by hand. I can't see anything in 'em, myself, but they're supposed to be rare, or something. They look like ordinary glasses, to me; but drop one, and you've dropped five guineas."

The servant returned, carefully carrying something which resembled a ball of cobwebby dust. He placed it on the table, and produced a corkscrew.

"I'll open it," said Mogador, "scram, Kato."

He wiped the neck of the bottle, and turned back his sleeves.

"Look at it! The rarest wine in the world! See this bottle? It's the only bottle of Zoltany wine in existence! Take a good look at it, Paula. Men lost their lives on account of this bottle of wine. It's a curio! D'you know what I paid for it? Well, never mind what I paid for it. By God, you might say that—oops!—gee, they must of used reinforced concrete for sealing-wax, or something——"

The cork began to emerge, dark brown and glistening.

"There she comes! One—two——"

Pop!

"Now!" exclaimed Mogador. He filled the glasses, and held one to the light. The wine seemed to twinkle. One might have imagined it to be blinking on its sudden exposure to strong sunlight.

Paula picked up her glass.

"Well, here's to us!" said Mogador.

He sniffed, and took a tentative sip. His face wrinkled. He spat, vehemently, with a grunt of disgust.

Paula touched the wine with her lips. She, also, grimaced. It had turned to vinegar.

"Well, can you imagine that?" said Mogador.

(3)

An hour later, when Paula had gone, Mogador called the Japanese servant.

"Say, Kato," he said, "have you noticed a man hanging around—a little fat feller, in a soft grey hat?"

"No, Mr. Mogador."

"Well, keep your eyes open, and let me know if you do."

"Yes, Mr. Mogador."

"K."

Mogador paced the room for a while.

Like most prospective bridegrooms, he appeared to be somewhat nervous. Once, the gentle footsteps of Kato in the passage, made him start; and in this start there was involved a curious gesture. Like a man afflicted with a sudden twinge of lumbago, he drew himself up and clapped his right hand to his hip-pocket.

Then he drank some whisky, and felt much better.

XXVII

THE FIRST ACT



IN a furnished apartment near Victoria Station, Mr. Kasbek, that amorphous gentleman, was engaged in clerical work.

Before him, on a frail little scalloped table, lay four piles of banknotes, three cheque-books, three paying-in books, and a sheet of paper.

There was something of the expert about Kasbek. He counted the money with the rapid precision of a bank-cashier; he jotted down figures with the lightning accuracy of a bookmaker's clerk:

	£	s.	d.
Cheque, J. S. Mog. ...	1,000	0	0
" Mrs. Glawb ...	1,000	0	0
" Pasta Fl. ...	910	0	0
179 membership subs. ...	89	10	0
	<hr/>		
	2,999	10	0
Expenses, approx. ...	50	0	0
	<hr/>		
Total ...	2,949	10	0
	<hr/>		

You understand that Kasbek was a man of method.

Beside the neatly-written grand total, he inscribed a minute tick. He had the air of a conscientious schoolteacher marking a sum.

Then he glanced casually at a little heap of loose papers, headed:

... dr. to Miss Pasta Flava.
To a/c rendered ...

These statements of account, for alterations, decorations, seats, curtains, carpets, and costumes, he placed, very neatly, in the fireplace. He glanced at the three paying-in books—Account G. Kasbek, Bayswater Bank; Account G. Kasbek, North-Eastern Bank; Account G. Kasbek, Great Western Bank—and added them, with the cheque-books, to the pile of bills. He struck a match, and applied the flame to his sheet of pencilled notes. Using this as a torch, he set fire to the papers in the fireplace, and stirred them with his foot as they flared up the chimney.

There was a cigarette-end in his ash-tray. He burned that, also.

Such tidiness, though soothing to the over-wrought housewife, is nevertheless characteristic of the criminal who takes care to leave no trace.

Kasbek's hard black eyes scrutinised the room. His valise lay on the bed; his money lay on the table. When these were removed, there would be no distinguishing sign to indicate that he had ever occupied the room—no cigarette-end, no scrap of paper, no fingerprint, no discarded tie; nothing but the burnt papers in the fireplace.

He transferred the banknotes to a canvas belt, which he fastened about his waist under his shirt. He took out four passports, and selected one which bore the photograph of a vacuous, elderly gentleman, and the signature of William Verne, described as "Salesman". He put this in his hip-pocket. The other three disappeared between the lining and the bottom of his suitcase.

"Why," mused Kasbek, "did she trust me? Not because I appear honest. I do appear very honest, but she did not trust me because of that. She trusted me, poor woman, because she is so vain. Because she feels, poor creature, that she exercises a fatal fascination over men. Blinded by this delusion, poor infatuated soul, she would allow a homicidal maniac to shave her neck; she would confide her handbag to a kleptomaniac, or her secrets to Walter Winchell. Dear me, dear me. . . ."

As he put on his hat, he paused; then took out a notebook, found a blank page, and wrote:

"Another facet of human nature which exemplifies the universal goodness of God, is Vanity. Upon vanity, the peace of mind of the foolish is based; and also the financial well-being of the astute."

He closed and pocketed the notebook, grasped his valise, and went rapidly downstairs, bounding from step to step as quietly as a great ball of wool; drifted through a traffic-block, billowed into Victoria Station, floated, without hesitation, aboard the Calais boat-train, and so, very appropriately, disappeared in a grey cloud of steam and smoke.

(2)

Kasbek's scheme must have been deeply laid. His disappearance was a marvel of perfect timing—he must have known the day and the hour of his departure, three months before. He may be likened to an infernal-machine, calmly ticking under the foundations of the Flava Theatre; working inexorably, with a terrible patience, and awaiting a certain inevitable moment. And at that moment, Kasbek had gone off.

He left London at midday. As Pasta Flava was assembling her company in the theatre, he was in mid-Channel. Before Pasta Flava had begun to feel uneasy, he was sniffing the fishy air of Calais. By the time the actors had put on their make-up, he was steaming into Paris; and at eight o'clock when they decided to start without him, Kasbek was lost for ever somewhere in the triangle enclosed by the Boulevards Raspail, Saint Michel, and Saint Germain.

But Pasta Flava was hysterical with anxiety. She ran from dressing-room to dressing-room. She burst in upon Futtercake, who was struggling with a ready-made bow-tie, and screamed at him:

"Futtercake! Where *is* Kasbek?"

Futtercake became flustered. He looked about him, helplessly, and slapped at his trousers-pockets with a bewildered hand.

"Not here!" he said.

Dita whispered, in Pasta Flava's ear:

"Better keep an eye on him. He's been drinking. He brought a bottle of gin in with him, and he's got through the lot. The whole lot. He didn't even offer anybody so much as a sip of it."

"Well, that's all right," said Pasta Flava, "he plays the part of a drunken man. Darling, don't you understand—we don't want all this silly formality, all this nonsense! It's *personality* that makes a show go over. Once I played Cleopatra, without knowing a single line of the poetry. But everybody cried like a baby. It's personality that does it, darling, personality; I remember——"

"Hear-hear!" exclaimed Futtercake. "Charming, charming. Friends, Romans, countrymen. What, what?"

Mrs. Glawb, with an air of gloom, shook her head.

"You an' your Kasbek. Well, now you see what men are, You an' your Kasbek! Hah! Well, if he ain't turned up by now, he won't come at all. Ha! There's more in this than meets the eye. Why ain't he coming? Why? Answer me that. And I got a thousand pound in this, a cool thousand. I suppose you think you can go and pick up a cool thousand out in the road, like horse-manew. I suppose you think that when it rains, it rains thousand-pound notes. I suppose you think I light me fire with 'em. Oh yes! Oh, yes, o' course I do! Well I don't do no such thing, ja see? If anythink's gorn wrong, I'll 'ave satisfaction out o' somebody; ja hear? I will! Hah!"

"Ssh!" murmured Bulba.

"And who d'you fink you're shushing, may I harst?"

"But the show must go on," said Dita.

Bulba patted Pasta Flava's shoulder, and offered encouragement:

"Now listen, my dear friend. I have read the philosophers

a little, and I tell you that there is nobody who is indispensable. If Kasbek comes, all the better; if not, all the worse. We all know our parts. For to-night, we can manage without him."

"Darling, you're right! Whatever happens, the show must go on. There's only one or two indispensable people in the world. You mustn't forget that I'm always here. The show must go on. Once, in Milan, I fell out of a window, and broke both my legs; but the show had to go on. I danced the Dying Swan, and the Firebird, and some Rumanian dances. And I had to be wheeled on to the stage on a thingummy, and two men had to hold me up. Everybody fainted. The Pope was there at the time, and he said: "Pasta Flava, you are the ballerina——"

"Then let us hurry," said Bulba.

"But you can take it from me, if anythink's gorn wrong, I'll want to know the whys and the wherefores!" cried Mrs. Glawb.

Petroneli came in. He was dressed as Fate, in a long black robe with a hood. In his right hand he carried a lighted lantern.

"Ve are lyate," he said. "All de pipple are in. I am ready."

"Where's Simson?" asked Bulba.

"He iss coming."

Simson the Samson appeared. He had nothing to do but simulate a rude noise—a work of mimicry at which he had proved himself to be remarkably adept—but the responsibility of it had been preying upon his mind; upon that niggardly pinch of ganglia and diluted grey-matter which may politely be described as his "mind". He felt that he was turning highbrow. He was fully prepared. It was suspected that he had gone into training for this event. He was dressed as if for a fight, in a singlet and flannel trousers; and his face wore a look of pugnacious determination which was frightful to behold. He shuffled his feet, and frowned. He clutched at his chin—Samson grasping the jawbone of an ass—and screwed up his face in an agony of concentration.

"You have your cue?" asked Bulba.

"Ah."

"Well, what is it?"

"You bends dahn, and I goes *pppphut!*"

"There is no need to do that quite so loud. . . . Yes, when I bend down to serve the soup. I say the words: 'Ghostly mushrooms, pale fungi' not long before. But you've remembered all that, eh?"

"Ah-ha."

"You will make no mistake?"

"Wot *me?*"

"Very good. Now, ladies; now, gentlemen—take your places."

They crowded on to the stage, and assumed their positions. Simson the Samson waited in the wings. His milky blue eyes were fixed on Bulba. He was tense with expectation.

The curtain rose on Scene One.

(3)

It is not improbable that, on a larger stage, Petroneli, as Fate, might have made his entry with appropriate dignity. As it was, he advanced like a man who wriggles his way through a dense crowd. His first stride landed him on the toes of the Second Harlot, who was unable to restrain a gasp of pain. Petroneli recoiled, and his swinging lantern swept the Fat Man's wig over his eyes. He picked his way to mid-stage, looking less like Fate than Guy Fawkes, holding the lantern at arm's-length above his head. He paused, pointed to Bulba, and prepared to laugh ironically.

The play proceeded:

HEINRICH LOBST (*In an undertone*) : Quick! Laugh!

FATE (*Struggling, apparently, with a kind of bronchial earthquake*) : Mer . . . mer . . .

HEINRICH LOBST (*In a frenzied whisper*) : Quickly, *chori vozmi!*

FATE (*Sneezing and laughing simultaneously*) : Merhishoo! Merher-hishoo! Rash-ho! (*his lantern goes out*).

PRINCESS (*In a breathless whisper*) : Idiot!

FATE (*Furtively wiping his nose on the sleeve of his robe*) : Merher!

PRINCESS (*In an undertone*) : Come on, Futtercake!

(*The BARON HICKOFF pauses. He wags a coy forefinger at the PRINCESS, and rolls drunkenly in his chair. He chuckles.*)

BARON HICKOFF: Hkh—hkh—hkh!

HEINRICH LOBST (*Furiously*) : Start! Futtercake, *start!*

BARON HICKOFF (*Starting*) : What, what?

HEINRICH LOBST (*Prompting*) : "Let us have wine"—go on!

BARON HICKOFF (*Jovially*) : Hey, yes; by all means; what, what? Lessave wine; jolly old rosy wine. Cup that cheers, bu' 'variably 'nebriates. I 'member in the Café Royal, 'n '98—or was it '99——?

HEINRICH LOBST (*Pinching him*) : Say your lines!

BARON HICKOFF: Why, yes! . . . Chrm, chrm! Friends, Romans, Countrymen——

HEINRICH LOBST (*Improvising hastily*) : His Highness is pleasantly intoxicated. My father, also, used to drink . . .

BARON HICKOFF (*Rapidly, and in a terrific voice*) : One moment! Pardon me, Bulba, ol' scout! . . . Let us have alcohol, waitah; vodka from Russia; ardent lickah from, um, er; um, er . . . something—something—something, er, to start the red worms of madness (*waggles forefinger*) writhing in my brain. What? Let us have—hal-lo!

(*The BARON HICKOFF places a hand on his chin, and discovers that he is wearing a beard. He touches it gingerly, with an air of absolute astonishment; then plucks it off, holds it up, and stares at it. Then he remembers that he should be wearing it. He hastily moistens it with saliva and replaces it, upside-down.*)

FATE: Merher! (*Turns, to go out.*)

HEINRICH LOBST (*In a whisper*) : Where are you going, fool?

FATE (*In a hoarse undertone*) : To light my lantern.

HEINRICH LOBST: Stay here!

FATE: I don't take order fum a Russki! (*Exit*).

HEINRICH LOBST (*Removing hors-d'œuvre plates*): Life is a fetid puddle. To live is like being slowly torn to pieces by the sepulchral teeth of a large pale horse, on a foggy November night in Chemnitz. The constant clattering of dishes in this place is like the chattering of a madman's teeth. I remember my father. His teeth chattered. How he used to bite me, because he loved to see his tooth-marks in my tender flesh! God rest his soul . . .

(*He is interrupted, at this point, by the sound of an argument, off-stage*: "Vill you hold you breath, ven you light the match? Ou vill you not?"—" 'Old yer own bleeten breff!"—"Twice you haf blown aht der match, already."—"Oo, me?"—"Yeys, you!"—"Oo you talkin' to?"—"You"—" 'Old me breff, eh?"—"Yes, hold you breath, ant do not let go of it no more ever. You are no goot. You are a fool!"—"Me? I'm the roughest grappler on the mats!"—"Some vooman tolt you, ant you believed it. You are a fancy-boy!"—"All right, you wait!" . . . PETRONELI *returns, with his lantern re-lighted*.)

Now I must serve soup. Soup is associated in my soul with my grandmother. She had only one tooth, and ate only soup. She loved to feel the soup flow round it. Oh God—if she had had two teeth, she might have been able to whistle. One long tooth, as large as a knife-handle. How clearly I can see it! And Grandfather, may he rest in peace, he tried to sew pearl buttons on to her gums, to take the place of teeth—he cut the buttons from his pants with a pruning-knife——

BARON HICKOFF (*Rising*): Pardon me.

PRINCESS (*In an audible whisper*): Where are you going to? You mustn't go out now!

BARON HICKOFF (*Wriggling uncomfortably*): I must.

PRINCESS: Wait till the end of the scene.

BARON HICKOFF: I can't wait!

PRINCESS: Damn you, you horrible swine; you must wait!

HEINRICH LOBST: Mushroom-soup. I give the Princess mushroom-soup. Ghostly mushrooms, pale fungi——

PRINCESS (*Striking the plate from his hand, and speaking in an ear-splitting voice*): I woulder that I had spliter your ber-ludder!

HEINRICH LOBST (*Signalling to SIMSON, off*): Sss! Come on! (*Stoops*).

(*In the wings, SIMSON THE SAMSON blinks. He has failed to remember his cue*).

HEINRICH LOBST (*To FATE; desperately*): Quickly, Petro-neli; you make a rude noise! Quickly! Quickly!

FATE (*Sullenly*): Vat is he here for, dat fancy-boy?

HEINRICH LOBST (*In a frenzied whisper*): A rude noise! At once!

FATE: Grrp!

HEINRICH LOBST: Not like that, idiot! Oh idiot, *idiot*!

FATE: Ppppppphut!

SIMSON THE SAMSON (*Who has been holding his breath for about two minutes; letting out the air with the noise of a trombone*): PPPPPPPPPPPPHUT!

And so chaos descended again upon the stage.

Bulba, bleeding at the nose, gesticulated to Simson the Samson, who spat on his hands and hauled at the curtain-ropes. The curtains came together in a blue-velvety blink, and the play was obliterated.

But while the audience rocked in a tempest of laughter, two serious-looking young men conversed in the stalls.

One said:

"How well they caught the spirit of the play! You know, it really was a remarkably clever piece of work; only nobody seems to understand. The confusion! The blundering stupidity of Fate! How real! How true! But they seem to have introduced some new and obscure symbols into that first scene."

The other replied:

"Yes, one admires their courage; but it's not really as Hackenschlag-Achweh meant it to be. It is magnificent, but it is not *Lobst*."

A third critic clinched the matter.

"It is more than *Lobst*—it is Life Itself," he said.

(4)

And behind the scenes, Pasta Flava gave vent to her anger. She looked about her for a scapegoat and, of course, selected Bulba.

"It's all your fault!" she cried. "You're to blame, and nobody else! You were paid to spoil my play! You did it on purpose! You——"

"But——"

"Be quiet! You ungrateful beast! You came to me, and I gave you everything——"

"Madame, that is not true. I have never accepted anything from you, except your hospitality; and I have tried to repay you——"

"Yes, repay me. By ruining everything, that's how you repay me! By spoiling my play, and making everybody laugh at me! At me! Nobody has ever laughed at me before. I've always been loved and honoured. And *you* have to make me a laughing-stock! You! Kasbek wouldn't have done a thing like that! Nor would Futtercake, or Petroneli, or Dita, or Simson—only you! But you always were jealous of me! Oh, I hate you! Get out of my sight! I never want to see your face again!"

"Very well," said Bulba, "but you have made a great mistake."

"Jist like the others," said Mrs. Glawb, "a blessed sandwich-man; a lot o' canal. Canal, that's wot they are; a blooming lot o' canal."

"Canaille?" said Bulba, putting on his hat, and looking at Mrs. Glawb with cold animosity in his eyes. "*You* say canaille——?"

"Can I what?" interposed Mrs. Glawb, "I never ast you whether I could or I couldn't. I said canal, and that means

sandwich-board men. Gah! Don't you talk to me!"

"Ignorance is a rock against which many a wise man has broken his head," said Bulba.

He turned on his heel, and went out.

"The same to you!" screamed Mrs. Glawb.

"Call him back!" sobbed Pasta Flava, "Call him back!"

But Bulba was gone.

Pasta Flava stopped weeping. She sat upright, summoning up the last feeble shadows of her dignity. She waved a hand, and said, in a dry, expressionless voice:

"I drove him away, and he was the only real friend I ever had. Everybody used to love me so much, but now nobody loves me any more. I've got nothing left, nothing at all."

"You've lost everything?" asked Dita. "All your money, and everything?"

"Everything," said Pasta Flava.

Petroneli and Simson exchanged glances.

Dita got her coat.

An hour later, Pasta Flava was completely alone in the empty theatre. She walked through the dressing-rooms, on to the stage. She stood, staring at the deserted auditorium. The emptiness and the silence made her afraid; but she still gazed up and down. She threw out her arms in a wide gesture, and cried:

"The Dance of the Little Swans!"

"*Wan!*" cried the hollow echoes.

In her bosom, something taut seemed to break, with a heavy snap. She threw herself down on the stage, and wept. Her body shook with terrible sobs; and the echoing of her bitter grief beat about her head like the ghostly wings of many ancient memories.

XXVIII

THE BRIDAL NIGHT



"WELL, kid," said Mogador, leading Paula into the lounge, "I thought I might have been able to give you a little honeymoon abroad; but I find I can't. I'll have to be in England for the next week or so."

"Business?" said Paula.

Mogador nodded. He went to the window, and looked out; then drew the curtains, and paced up and down.

Paula looked at him. It seemed that, in the past five minutes he had grown a little older. He had the stoop of a man who is tired out. His cheeks were flushed, and there were black semi-circles under his eyes.

"It's a strain," said Mogador; "at times, it's a strain."

He sat down next to Paula, and put an arm around her.

"It's funny, really," said Paula, "that a man like you should have to work so hard. I should have thought that you might have retired years ago."

"And done what?"

"Well . . . amused yourself."

"Oh, I've amused myself, all right!" said Mogador, with a hard laugh. "You don't know how I've amused myself. I've averaged about eighteen hours a day, amusing myself. When I come to think of it, I've had a very amusing life."

"No, joking aside."

"What makes you think that I'm joking?"

"Well, not exactly joking—being ironical, you know. You sounded so grim, as if your life were already finished."

Mogador stared at her. Gradually, his mouth curved into a smile, and deep, humorous lines appeared at the corners of his eyes.

"Well, tell me," he said, at length, "what does it feel like, to be a bride?"

"Well, isn't it a bit early to say? After all, I've only been married since this afternoon."

"It would have been nice, if we could have got away to the continent, for a few days, wouldn't it?" said Mogador.

"Yes, it would have been nice. I suppose we couldn't have got away just . . . over this week-end?"

"No. I . . . can't leave England just now," said Mogador. He rose, and went to the window again. He parted the curtains an inch or so, and looked out cautiously; then abruptly pulled the curtains together, and lit a cigarette.

"What are you looking at?" asked Paula.

"To see if it's raining," said Mogador, "wouldn't you like a drink?"

"But I drank so much at dinner."

"Never mind. Another drink won't hurt you. A night-cap."

Paula felt suddenly timorous and isolated. She watched Mogador as he mixed the drinks. She was winnowed of conversation, and acutely conscious of the silence. She said:

"You do look tired. You really ought not to work so hard."

Mogador flashed his twenty-six-toothed smile at her over the cocktail-shaker.

"Listen, honey," he said, "from this minute until Monday morning, I want to forget work. I want to forget it, and I don't want to be reminded of it. I want to forget that I'm John Stone Mogador. I want to relax. I want to eat, and drink, and laugh, and make love, and sleep. See?"

Paula shuddered. She took the proffered glass, and drank. Mogador filled his glass again, and emptied it at a gulp. Then he sighed deeply, glanced at his watch, and said:

"Eleven o'clock."

"Is it? It's quite early, still, don't you think?"

"You think so? I think we ought to retire," said Mogador.

For the third time, he went to the window, and peeped

out; and when he turned again, his face was as pale as ashes. He poured out another cocktail, and immediately drank it. "Yes, we'll retire!" he said.

"John; don't you think . . . as we're both so tired . . . we ought to wait——"

Mogador interrupted, in a low, steady, desperate voice:

"Wait? What for? God, no! We won't wait." His voice rose suddenly, and became a kind of restrained shout: "Paula! Paula! Haven't you realised—haven't you ever realised that life is *short*?"

He turned, and refilled his glass.

Paula parted the curtains with her finger, and quickly glanced down.

On the opposite pavement a man was standing—a short, squat, bulky figure of a man, with his hands in his pockets; immobile, rotund, not unlike a Buddha—plainly visible in the light of a lamp-post; all but his face, which was concealed by the wide brim of a grey felt hat.

"Darling, you go on. I'll follow," said Mogador.

(2)

In Mogador's bedroom, the Functionalists had run amok. If, by some freak of chance, a stray mote of dust had managed to find its way into the conditioned air of the place, it would have been hard put to it to find a place to rest in. The walls had no corners. The lights were concealed. You pressed a button, and a bar of amber radiance appeared round the walls. Shadows had been abolished. The floor was of black glass. The furniture was made of stainless steel, canvas, and glass. Everything was smooth, shiny, and hard.

Exquisite in her diaphanous green pyjamas, Paula approached the bed. Her reflection gazed up at her from the gleaming black floor. She got into bed, and pulled the cover over her. Glancing about her, she felt a sudden spasm of terror; a contraction of the abdomen. She quivered, on the

edge of panic. For the first time in her life, her hard, bright brain refused to function. She sat still, devoid of thought, holding the blanket to her chin.

She heard Mogador moving in his dressing-room. The door was ajar. She crept out of bed and listened.

She heard two terrifying sounds: the crackle and rustle of a discarded dress-shirt, and the "Uh . . . uh" of a man stooping to remove his shoes.

She knelt, and peeped through the keyhole.

Mogador was undressing. With each garment, he seemed to discard an inordinately large proportion of his identity. His trousers fell to the floor. He appeared in his underclothes; in trunks and a vest of ridiculously dainty silk. Paula stared, fascinated. As she saw him in profile, she observed—frenziedly assuring herself of his most desirable aspects—the massive bulge of his chest, and the flat contours of his abdomen.

Then something horrible happened.

Something went "Snick-snick". Paula recognised the sound of the unfastening of a corset-belt at high tension. Suddenly, Mogador had a paunch.

It was as if his chest had slipped bodily into his belly.

He glanced about him, with an expression of guilt. Paula felt her face damp with the cold sweat of a nightmare; a nightmare in which the ancient and familiar order of the fairy-tale was disgustingly reversed. The Beast was not changing into a Prince: the Prince was changing into a Beast.

Mogador stood at the mirror, proudly contemplating himself. He drew back his lips, and scrutinised his teeth. He took another mirror, and, holding it behind him, looked at his hair. He seemed to find it unsatisfactory; he selected a soft brush, and arranged it carefully.

Then, using both hands, he took off his hair, and placed it on his dressing-table.

Mogador was bald.

Paula felt sick. In the horror of that moment, she half expected him to unscrew his legs, disarticulate his arms,

put his eyes in a glass of water, and leave nothing but a featureless head and a puffy torso; a kind of obscene cottage-loaf.

Mogador struggled out of his underclothes, like a huge white caterpillar sloughing a skin. He put on a suit of crimson silk pyjamas, cut in the Russian style. He flexed his arms, and snapped his jaws together. Then his hand went up, and the light went out.

Paula reeled back into bed.

The light went out in the bedroom. Mogador's bare feet padded across the floor; and just before he drew back the blankets, there came another sound, a hard, brief, metallic sound which made Paula start, and stopped the beating of her heart.

An unmistakable *klik-klik*.

Paula knew, then, that Mogador and his smile occupied twin beds.

"Phsweet darling!" whispered Mogador; and enveloped her in a vast, soft embrace.

THE SCORPION IN THE RING OF FIRE



TEN days later, hemmed in by his eight telephones, and crouching in the shadow of his tape-machine, John Stone Mogador spoke to Mike:

"You see how it is? The bigger you are, the easier they hit you. Try and get Corcoran again, Mike."

Mike picked up a telephone, and spoke into it:

"Get Corcoran, Wall Street."

A telephone rang.

"Yes?" said Mike, "Yes? . . . Mr. Mogador, there's Bergson, of the *Financial Courier*, calling you from Paris."

Mogador's face grew whiter.

"Let me speak," he said.

The diaphragm of the receiver vibrated. The voice of Bergson, hundreds of miles away, sounded like the barking of a dog.

"Hell!" said Mogador; and threw the telephone across the office.

"Steady!" said Mike, "Steady!"

"There's panic on the Bourse," said Mogador.

Collins came in.

"There's Mr. Hargrove to see you," he said, "he's got an appointment. D'you want me to put him off?"

"No. Show him in. Wait a minute, what's this? They've got through to New York? Good, good. Tell Hargrove to wait. Mike, gimme the telephone, and lemme speak—and get out of here." Mogador waited, biting his lips, until Mike was gone; and then he began to speak into the telephone: "Hallo! Is that Corcoran? Yes, I recognise your voice. I want you to remit three million dollars, immediately. Yes, three million dollars; immediately—to reach me by two a.m.

to-morrow, New York time. Yes, I got to meet a coupon, due in two days. I got to pay a million on account of the Player bill. Maturing? It's nearly mature. Yup. You must try. Corcoran, d'you hear me? You must *try*! It's important! K! Bye."

Collins burst in.

"Petersen's calling from Stockholm. They're panicking."

"Christ!" said Mogador, "Send a boy out for a bottle of whisky."

"For *what*?"

"You heard what I said! A bottle of whisky!" shouted Mogador.

Collins went out, with a look of deep astonishment on his face. Mike came in.

"Mr. Bell," he said.

"Send him in, and see that I'm not disturbed," said Mogador.

Mr. Bell was a small, thin man. He had the eye of a vulture, and no lips. He sat on Mogador's desk, and spoke in a small, thin voice:

"I want ten thousand. Why haven't I had my ten thousand?"

"You've had more than a hundred thousand pounds off of me," said Mogador, without emotion.

"Well? Am I worth it, or am I not? Are you asking me to have pity on you, or what?"

"I wouldn't ask for pity from a man, let alone a rat," said Mogador.

"No? That's all very nice. But I want my ten thousand."

"You can't have it to-day."

"No? When, then?"

"To-morrow."

"At what time?"

"Mid-day."

"You're sure? You're not playing with me?"

"Listen, Bell; I grew out of playing with cow-dung forty years ago."

"Listen, Mogador—I've had enough of your insults. If

"I don't get that ten thousand by mid-day to-morrow, I talk."

"Listen, rat; if you don't get your ten thousand by mid-day to-morrow, you can talk and be damned!"

Bell went out, without another word. Mogador wiped his forehead.

Mike came in, with a bottle of whisky and a glass. He opened the bottle. Mogador filled a glass, and drank.

A telephone rang.

"Von Aal calling from Berlin," said Collins, "they're on the verge of a stampede."

The thin glass caved in in Mogador's hand; blood trickled down his fingers.

"Are you going to see Hargrove?" asked Mike.

"Send him in," said Mogador, "I give him two minutes."

Hargrove limped into the office; an old, pale man, with a stick. He sat down heavily.

"There was just one thing I wanted to discuss with you, Mr. Mogador," he said.

"Couldn't you leave it for to-morrow?"

"Well, I could, if you're very busy; but it won't take a moment. Mr. Mogador; you know there are rumours going around."

"Well, what of it? There always are rumours, and there always will be."

"But they seem to affect our credit."

"So what?"

"Well, don't you think we might have an exhaustive independent audit, just to satisfy the world that there's no truth——"

"What the devil d'you mean, 'exhaustive independent audit just to satisfy the world'? What for? Since when did I have to go out of my way to explode rumours? What d'you take me for? A crook?"

"Good heavens, no!"

"Very well, then."

"I had only your interests at heart, Mr. Mogador," said Hargrove.

"Yes, I know," said Mogador, gently, "you're a good feller, Hargrove; you've always stood by me, and I shan't forget you. Scram now, like a good boy."

A telephone rang.

"Corcoran calling from New York," said Mike.

"Corcoran? Gimme 'phone!" Mogador snatched at the instrument. "'Lo, Corcoran? Yes? Yup, two a.m. to-morrow was what I said. Wednesday will be too late!" Mogador's voice shook: "Can't you understand what I'm trying to tell you, man? Wednesday will be too late! And two million won't be enough! You've got to do it! Did you hear what I said? You've got to do it . . . Yup. K. I'll wait." Mogador rang off. He looked for the glass, and found that he had broken it. He put the bottle to his lips, and gulped down a mouthful of the whisky.

Mike came in. He saw Mogador's bloody right hand, and exclaimed:

"Look at that! I'll get you some lint and iodine."

"What for?" asked Mogador.

"Well, you can't go about with your hand all cut. You'll get some dirt in it, and get blood-poisoning——"

"Don't be funny, Mike. Has the Hungarian State Monopoly Administration got through yet?"

"That's what I came in about."

"Well?"

"We won't get our twenty-five million pengő for some time. Credits haven't yet been voted."

"Well, and that's that," said Mogador. He glanced incuriously at his cut hand, and remarked: "Funny how the whisky stings, when it gets into a cut. Be a good boy, Mike, and get me another glass."

Collins appeared.

"Mr. Mogador," he said, "there's a man insists on seeing you. He won't give a name. He says he must see you."

"What sort of man?"

"A little, fat man, in a grey trilby hat."

Mogador's cheeks became, in that moment, as white as

this paper. But in a level voice, quiet and passionless, he said:

"Show him in; and leave us alone."

(2)

There came into the office a short, thick-set, dumpy man. He was dressed in a heavy grey suit. Across the convexity of his waistcoat there hung a massive gold watch-chain, decorated with an elk's tooth. He had the face of a porcelain Buddha, full of placid meditation; but his little grey eyes had the penetrative quality of iron spikes. He held, in his right hand, a grey felt hat with a wide brim. His right hand rested on the knob of a Malacca cane.

He began to speak, with a faint American accent.

"Guess you know who I am, Mr. Mogador."

"I have an idea," said Mogador, coolly.

"Maybe you know why I'm here, also?"

"I don't. I know you've been watching me for the last six weeks. You were after me in Paris, Berlin, Stockholm, and Hamburg. You've been watching my flat, like a watchdog. What d'you want?"

"I want to put one or two questions to you, Mr. Mogador."

"Well?"

"About your Secret Loan to Hungary."

"Well?"

"You received, in return, fourteen million pounds sterling in Hungarian Treasury Bills. Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Has interest been paid?"

"Yes."

"Credited?"

"Yes."

"To whose account?"

"To the dividend account. It's all in order."

"Is it? Then tell me, why were those bills never stamped?"

"They were stamped."

"They were not. And where did the fourteen million pounds come from, to pay for them?"

"That's my affair."

"Hm! And the names of the three officials whose signatures are on the bills, are Soskut, Krafft, and Raab."

"How did you know that?"

"You'll find out, later. You forged those signatures."

"You're crazy!"

"You forged the bills, also."

"You're talking like a child."

"The bills were printed in Paris. You had them printed yourself."

"You must be mad!"

"Another thing: you sold your controlling interest in Kalamann Cellulose to Van Dyn's of Amsterdam. Is that so?"

"Well, I guess everybody knows that."

"You grossly misrepresented the Company's cash resources."

"Ridiculous! But go on."

"Your balance-sheets have been examined. You speak of cash deposited at banks. There is no cash."

"It's purely a matter of an error in the translation. My balance-sheets say 'on deposit'. The Dutch translation reads: 'deposited at banks'. I've only just found that out. I——"

"You know perfectly well that it's a swindle. The cash isn't there. Even if it were on deposit with the Mogador Group, the whole affair is crooked. Where are the liquid resources of the Mogador Group? They don't exist, Mister. I've come to tell you: the game's up."

"Don't make me laugh," said Mogador.

"There are some more things I'd like to talk to you about."

"Well, listen, I can't listen to them now. Business before pleasure. Meet me at my flat, at four o'clock."

"Very well. Good-morning, Mr. Mogador."

"Good-morning. And thank you, for a very pleasant quarter of an hour."

As the door closed, Mogador grasped the whisky-bottle, drank, and set it down half empty.

The telephone rang.

"Corcoran," said Mike, entering.

"Gimme 'phone. 'Lo, Corcoran? Well? You can't? That's definite, is it? You can't get the money. I take it that's absolutely final? Good. Well, good-bye old pal—say, are you there? Are you interested in fireworks? No? Well, stand by for a firework display that'll interest you! Bye."

Mogador stood up. He went to a safe built into the wall, and opened it. He called:

"Mike! Collins!"

The two men came in.

"Listen," said Mogador, taking out an iron box, "you boys have stood by me. I'd like to make you a little present. Here's two blocks of Empire Chemicals. They're good and sound. Split 'em between you; take four thousand each."

"But——"

"Don't argue; do as I tell you. Pay every member of the staff an extra month's salary, and tell 'em to drink my health." Mogador took out a little black notebook, and tossed it to Collins: "Go through that. You'll find a number of names and addresses in it. Mail five hundred pounds in notes to every one. I trust you guys to do that for me. Have you got that clear?"

"Yes, Mr. Mogador," said Mike, "but what's the idea?"

The telephone rang.

"Mr. Gold says he wants you to call a meeting of directors, as soon as possible. He sounds in a hurry. He says it's vitally important," said Collins.

"Yes? Tell 'em to meet at my flat, at four this afternoon," said Mogador.

"But what's the meaning of all this?" asked Mike.

"It means that we part company," said Mogador, "I'm going to retire. Shake, you boys. You were good fellers."

He bestowed upon Mike and Collins his warm and radiant handshake.

Mike could not speak.

Collins, who had a face of leather, and a mouth like a nut-cracker, did something particularly shocking. He gave a kind of dry cough, and burst into tears.

"Ah, can it!" said Mogador, scornfully.

He put on his hat, and went out.

(3)

He returned to his flat, and called the Japanese servant.

"Kato," he said, "is Mrs. Mogador out?"

"Yes, Mr. Mogador."

"When did she say she'd be back?"

"About four-thirty, Mr. Mogador."

"Good." Mogador fumbled in his fob-pocket, and took out a roll of banknotes. "Here, take this."

"What, all this for me, Mr. Mogador?"

"Yup. Take it, and take the day off. And be out of the flat inside five minutes."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Mogador!"

"Cut out the thanks, and scram. I want to be alone."

Kato went away. Mogador opened his desk, and took out some notepaper. He carefully removed a hair from the nib of his fountain-pen, and wrote some notes.

He addressed the first to Paula:

My Dear Paula,

I regret to inform you that you bought a pup. For that matter, so did I, but with my eyes open. I knew you to be the perfect gold digger, but found you very attractive. I knew that you thought me to be the perfect sugar daddy, and I must say that I have had as much pleasure out of fooling you as anything else that has passed between us. I know your kind. You like to play high. You like to take everything without paying for it. I do not blame you for this, but honey baby, I could teach you a few things about that game. You

are very smart, but not quite smart enough. I like your body, but mentally you make me sick, and so it gives me great pleasure to reflect that you have got no money, no husband, no virginity, and no nothing. Your shares in the Mogador Group are quite worthless, owing to insufficient assets and heavy liabilities. Better luck next time.

Your loving husband,

JOHN.

The next, he addressed to the fat little man in the grey hat :

To Mr. Smith,

Dear Sir,

I have to hand it to you. You chased Steinberg to the grave, and Belton, and Harry Carson Oliver. Van Dyn could not have employed a better man. You may now add John Stone Mogador to your bag. If I had time I would will you my scalp to nail over your fireplace. Also my tusks.

JOHN STONE MOGADOR.

He poured out a tumblerful of whisky, and drank it slowly. For a minute or two, he drew faces and cubes on the blotting-pad. Then, like a man inspired, he took a sheet of notepaper, and wrote :

Personal indebtedness: £250,000,000.

Realisable assets: about £ 9,000,000.

Any fool can leave the world with a little more than he had to start with. As you live, you naturally accumulate things. But it takes a really big man to finish with about £240,000,000 less than nothing. I could easily have stopped ten years ago, with a clear twenty million dollars. But comfort and security is all right for ordinary men, not for me. It is better to be an earthquake. I was so big that I darkened the sun, and now I am coming down with a crash that will shake the whole world. All over the earth, big men and big trusts have stood

or fallen with me. The hand that writes this has controlled world monopolies, and made and broke markets. My credit has been six times greater than many European nations. It is a big thing, for one man alone to do all this. My head is nothing but a shell filled with soft stuff, but a whole system of international finance has been built up on top of it. I have shown the world how the dreams that came out of my head were stronger than other men's realities. My fairy-tales were things that nobody could disbelieve—my crooked ledgers, my fictitious contracts, my flimsy little assets ten times mortgaged, and my assets that did not exist at all. Everything stood on me. I held up the Red Sea, like Moses; and in a minute I am going to let it rip, and drown armies. It is a good thing to have power. It is worth rising, if you can come down with a big enough crash. It is a fine thing to be able to blow the lid off the earth with one nine millimetre cartridge.

JOHN STONE MOGADOR.

He underlined his signature; jabbed his pen into the desk, and smashed it.

Then he went into the bedroom.

He carefully adjusted his false hair, and changed his collar. He lay back in an arm-chair, and smoked a cigarette. Then he took from his hip-pocket a superb automatic pistol, a thing of power, with a narrow blue barrel, and an ivory handle.

He put the muzzle in his mouth, slid it along his tongue until it touched the back of his throat, and, with a steady forefinger, pressed the trigger.

THE UNDEFEATED SOLDIER



THREE months had passed. In the drawing-room of a house in Tottenham Street, Florrie Oxborrow pleaded with her landlady:

"But Mrs. Beale; if only you could wait another week, just one more week—I'd be sure to find another job by then, and then I'd pay you. Honestly I would, Mrs. Beale! I'm *sure* to find another job by next week!"

But Mrs. Beale gazed at her, with the diagnostic scrutiny of a woman grown old in feminine experience, and shook her head.

"No you won't, Miss. Not in your condition, you won't."

"But——"

"No, I'm sorry, you'll have to go. I've always kept a respectable house, and I can't have . . . Besides, you owe a month's rent already, and I've got *my* rent to pay, haven't I? No, you'll have to pack your things and go."

"Well . . . yes. I'm sorry I've been a nuisance; only you see . . . I've got nowhere to go."

"I'm very sorry for you, but you can't stop here. You'll have to pack up your things, and go to-day."

"All right, Mrs. Beale," said Florrie. Her voice was low, dull, and expressionless; a monotone shaped into words, entirely devoid of hope.

She went to her room and packed; put on her mackintosh and turned up the collar; grasped her suitcase and went out.

Overhead, the wind whistled. A ragged horde of clouds was galloping in from the north—the vedettes of the advancing winter.

She reached Tottenham Court Road. The north wind

struck at her. The clouds opened fire. A spatter of rain rapped at her mackintosh. She turned her back to the wind, and walked towards Oxford Street.

The sky became greyish, almost opaque; it sagged towards the earth like wet linen. Cold water dripped through it. The wind rose, and turned the raindrops into projectiles. The night seemed to come abruptly.

Florrie walked on. The entire world was drenched with water. Water filled her left shoe, and moved under her foot with a soft sucking noise—*ghee . . . ghee*. The pavements assumed a dull metallic gloss, as if they had been rubbed with stove-polish. Seven o'clock struck, and the streets filled with people.

She paused at the corner of Oxford Street—that waiting-place of the damned. Two men in padded overcoats whistled after her.

She plunged into the torrent of Charing Cross Road. The unending swarm of the West End flowed towards her, around her, and past her. She rested, for a minute or two, in the shelter of the arch in Falconburg Court, and looked out upon a rounded oblong of London—a screen, across which there moved a scurrying multitude, like a retreating army; a flock of cars, cautiously nuzzling forward; a drove of lumbering omnibuses.

So Florrie came to Trafalgar Square. The bleak column and the cold wet statues steadily reflected the light; but at the periphery, the whole night seemed to revolve like a water-wheel. People squirted in through the choked nozzles of the Strand and Whitehall; swirled round, and shot out along the trough of Pall Mall, and through the sinister gurgling drains of St. Martin's Lane.

She turned into Villiers Street, that awful shadow-land of arches, and walked towards the river. She arrived at the Embankment.

At this point, she felt that she could go no farther.

Between high stone banks, the Thames flowed past like a sliding ribbon of zinc. A few leaves still lingered on the

trees, and lay against the sky in dark, clotted patterns, reminiscent of tea-leaves on the bottom of a cup.

Florrie dropped her suitcase, and sat down. Resting her chin on her hands, she gave herself to despair.

She thought:

"I don't want to live. I want to die. It's a wicked thing, to go on living, and bring another child into a world like this. If I were brave enough, I'd jump into the water. But I'm not brave enough. But I don't want to go on living. Oh God, what shall I do?"

And she burst into tears.

Just then, a voice at her elbow said:

"Don't do that. It is not so bad as that."

But Florrie continued to weep.

"Well," said the voice, "with a woman, it is better out than in, as the saying goes. So cry, my poor child."

She turned, and saw a man sitting next to her. His hand went to his waistcoat, and came up with two bent cigarettes. He offered one to her. She took it, automatically.

A match flared. The man's face jumped out of the darkness—a thin face, remotely satanic in the flickering yellow light of the match; scarred, battered, and deeply lined, with a broken nose and a straggling moustache of indeterminate colour—the face of an ancient warrior; a kind of field of glory, where the consciousness of dignity held its own against the onslaughts of weariness. He wore a drooping felt hat, and a tie which had been of black silk, but which resembled a piece of crumpled lead-foil. Across his knees, lay an ebony cane with a silver knob.

"There," he said, giving her a light, "inhale deeply. After a cigarette, everything tastes better. It is an actual fact, that things are not half so bad, when one has a cigarette to smoke."

"You're awfully kind," said Florrie, drying her eyes.

"Things are bad with you?" asked the man, gently.

"Yes."

"You are in trouble?"

"Yes."

"Woman's trouble?"

Florrie nodded.

"You feel that this is the end of everything?"

"It is."

"If I may be permitted to say so—it frequently seems to be, but never is. With me, it seemed that Irkutsk was the end of everything; but I am still here."

"It's different, with men."

"I was about to go and drink a cup of tea. Would you do me the honour of joining me?"

"It's very nice of you."

"Ah, forgive me: I have the honour of addressing——?"

"Florrie Oxborrow."

"My name is Bulba; Volodia Bulba, Colonel, late of the Dnieper Cossacks."

He picked up her suitcase.

(2)

"It is always necessary to look forward," said Bulba, "it is necessary to fix our eyes upon that which we cannot yet see. Otherwise, what is the use? We, ourselves, are not enough. You understand what I say—we are insufficient, as we stand,—we, and all we know. There must be people who will go beyond us. We, ourselves, can go no further. Very well. It is necessary for our children to surpass us. If we were an end, there would be no hope; but we are a means, not an end. So if you are to bear a child, you must learn to bear it well."

"But I'm afraid," said Florrie.

"Of what? Pain?"

"Well . . . the whole business."

"And yet, it is a curious thing—we never hear a healthy mother speak of the horrors of birth. Before, yes; but after, no. Concerning such things, men do most of the talking; but not those who have given birth. Perhaps it is because the pains of childbirth are not bad pains."

"Well, I should think that all pains are bad pains."

"Not all. Not every pain has a compensation. How can you compare the pains of birth with the pains of frostbite, or dysentery, or a broken leg? To childbirth there is attached a blessing. You know what that is? It is that you forgive the pains for hurting you. These are the only pains that do not cause regret. There is a sort of forgetfulness about them. No good thing is made without pain. Pain is the fire that gives strength. . . ."

He paused. In his mind, unformulated ideas hovered. He meant to say:

It must be pressed out of your travail, and bathed in your blood, and washed in your tears; hammered on the anvil of the childbed, and tempered in the fire of your anguish. It must be strong; it must be hard. There is a whole jungle for it to fell. There is a whole wilderness for it to uproot. There is a whole world for it to carve from the ruins.

He said:

"You must give birth to an axe."

Florrie grimaced. Neither of them spoke for a while. Then Bulba said:

"It is always men who talk most. Excuse me."

"Life really is hard," said Florrie.

"All good things are hard."

"And really, after all, isn't it futile?"

"Hush!" said Bulba, "That is one of the unsavoury possibilities in the human family. Among gentlemen, such things must not be brought up. To say such a thing is to acknowledge defeat. No good soldier acknowledges defeat. Even in Hell there is hope!"

He pulled his hat down over his eyes.

Meanwhile, the rain poured down, steadily and relentlessly, soaking into the surface of this strange world—this superb and shining world which floats in space—this burnt and frozen world—this pinched and punctured world which glitters from afar—this green and glorious world—this world where men get tired. . . .

"I am your friend. Life is long. Day must break. All things pass. Death is swallowed up in victory, as the saying goes. Come with me," said Bulba. "There is nothing big enough to fear."

And, having put Florrie to sleep in his poor little attic room, he tiptoed out into the rain and, leaning on his stick in a doorway, waited for the daylight, saying to himself:

"All the same, it is a devil of a lot better than being dead!"

LONDON 1934/5

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